IN THE MAG: WORLD-EXCLUSIVE FEATURE

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
THE BURNING CRUSADE

COMPUTER GAMING

The PC Gaming Authority

FOR OVER 20 YEARS
ISSUE 257

THE BLOOD ELVES

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
THE BURNING CRUSADE

NEW RACE. NEW PLANET. NEW DUNGEONS.
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DEFINITIVE REVIEWS

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DECEMBER 2005 ISSUE 257
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EVERYONE 10+

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Violence

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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EXPANSION PACK

BATTLEFIELD 2
SPECIAL FORCES

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* Requires Battlefield 2™ to play

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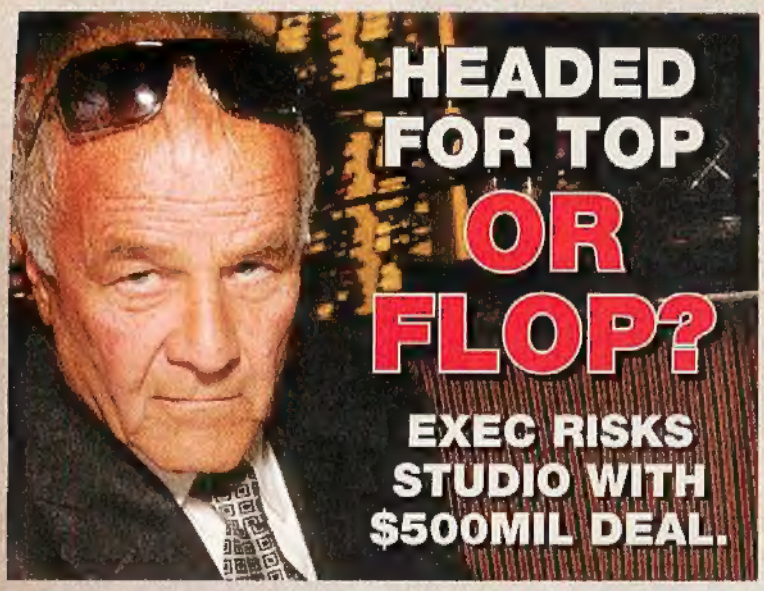

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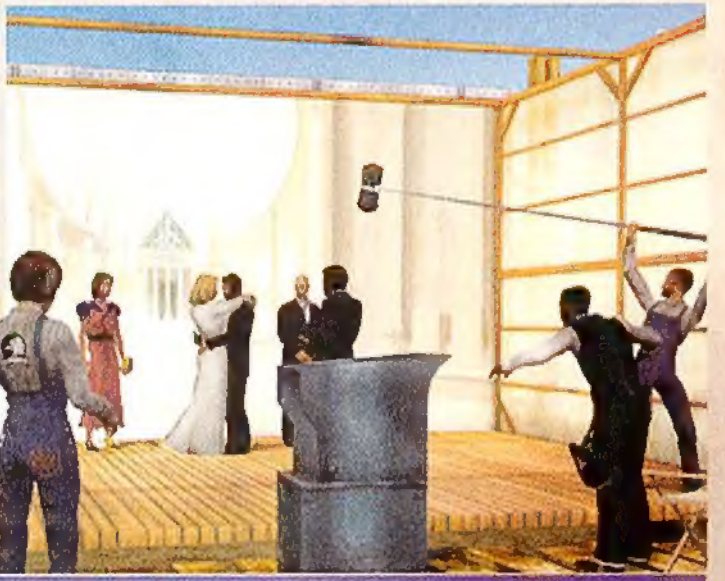

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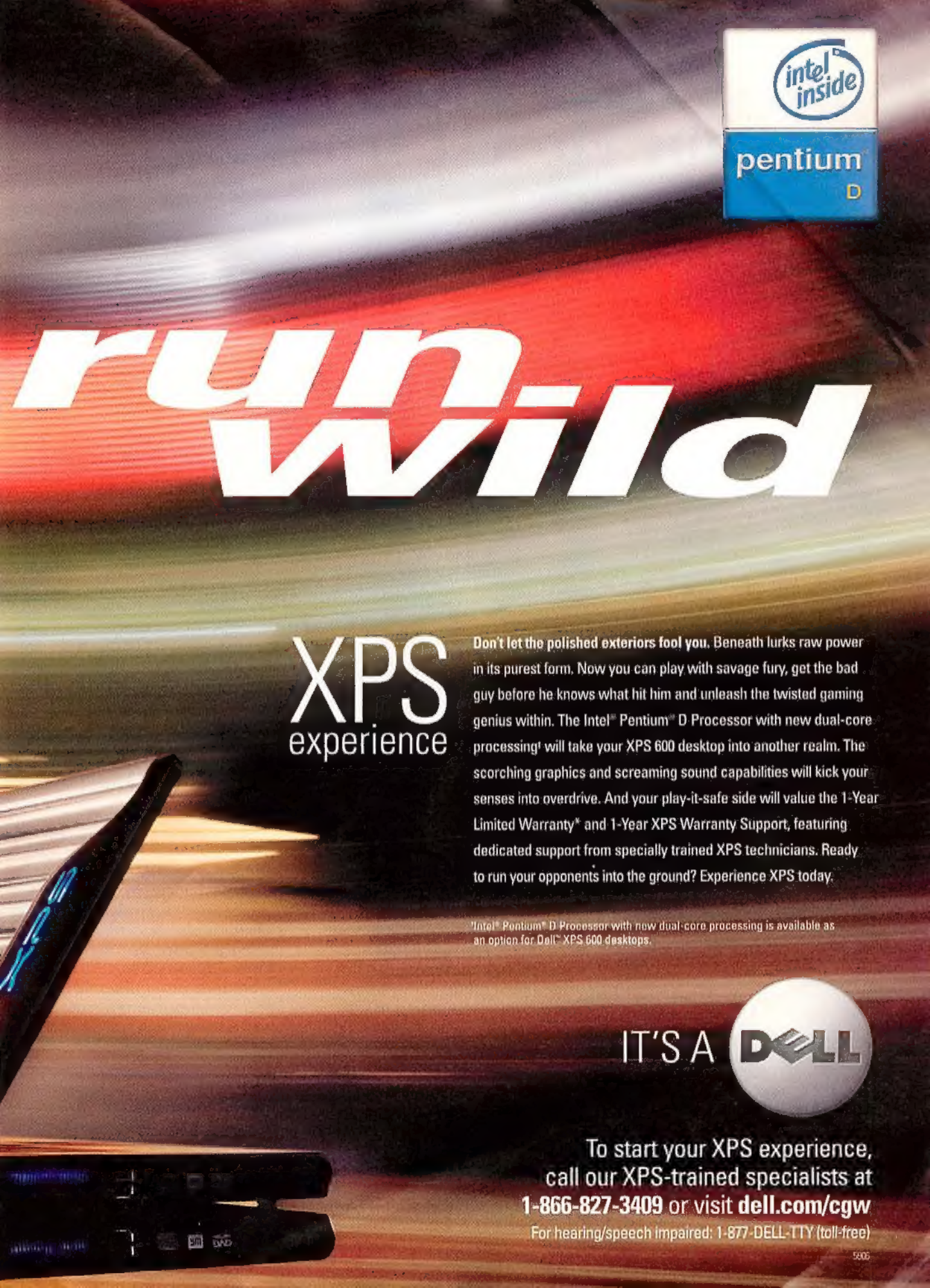
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FINAL FANTASY XI ONLINE

"All of the missions, monsters, magic, and side quests that players have grown to know and love."

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All of the missions, monsters, magic, and side quests that players have grown to know and love from this series are there in FFXI, but now you're living the adventure and sharing it with others.

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"The choices are endless, and they are all yours."

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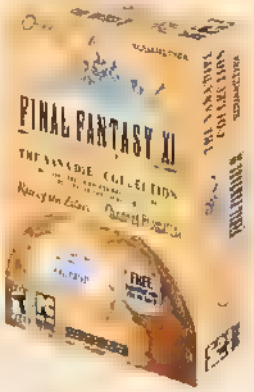

Originally sold separately, this is now the best way to get your adventure started on PC! This new package contains the original, award-winning **FINAL FANTASY XI** game, two complete expansion packs: **Rise of the Zilart**™ and **Chains of Promathia**™ (filled with additional areas, character jobs and mysteries to explore), the innovative **PlayOnline**® software, and the **Tetra Master**® online card game.

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• Software available separately for play on the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system

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■ COVER STORY

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

If you're reading this and didn't flip immediately to page 62, then you are not as big a fan of *WOW* as editor-in-chief Jeff Green, who practically skipped down to Blizzard, shrieking like a teenage girl, to get the world-exclusive first look at the developer's first expansion pack to its MMO megahit.

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Can *CGW* EIC Jeff Green write 300 words without once mentioning *World of WarCraft*? We're gonna go with "no."

18 Letters

This mag is your mag! Send the skinny on your mods, pet projects, and community chicanery to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.

26 Radar

Now playing: a homebrew *Half-Life* remake; the first in our series of six monthly instal ments on the evolution of the MMORPG; "Schools of Magic," our blowout on fantasy-themed games of all genres; and more.

75 Reviews

What are you waiting for? Pick up *Indigo Prophecy*. You may want to wait on *Age of Empires III* and *Black & White 2*, though. Flip to our Reviews section to find out why.

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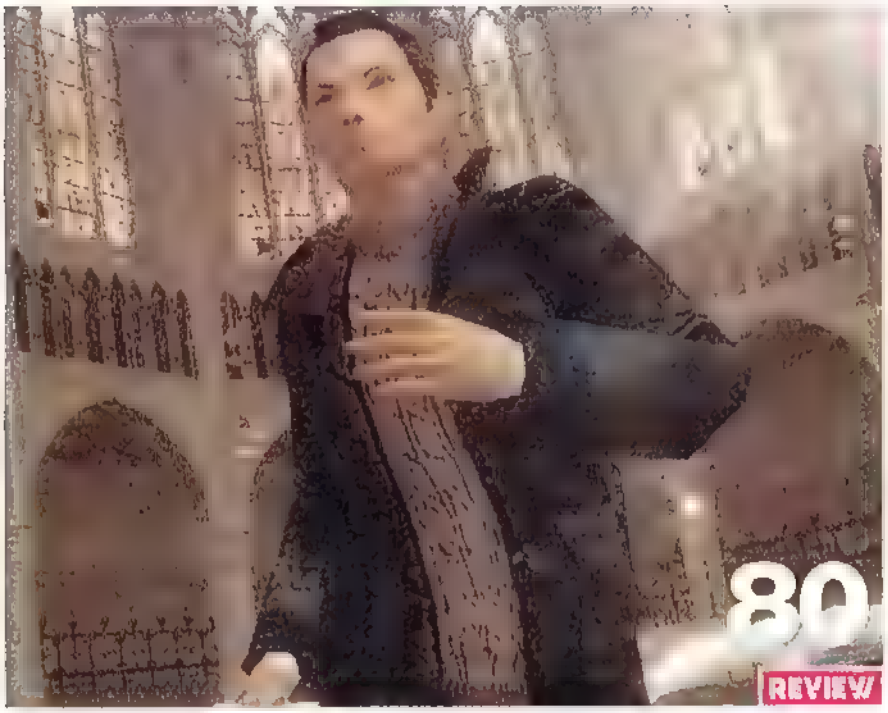

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Caught in the CrossFire (ATI's twin-card take on Nvidia's SLI mode): At long last, we put the powerhouse X1000 line of graphics cards through its paces.

122 Tom vs. Bruce

Dogfighters Tom and Bruce go *Down in Flames*

?? Scorched Earth

Fear not, Coffeyheads! Rabid editor Robert Coffey returns next issue with more hate

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

CONDEMNED.1UP.COM

Dave Hasle, producer of first-person scare-'em-up *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, blogs about making games that go bump in night.

CLIFFYB.1UP.COM

Ever the entertainer, *Unreal* cocreator Cliff Bleszinski mouths off about whatever's on his mind.

THEPIG.1UP.COM

Women get all the attention at 1UP.com. Even dudes in disguise like "Christine Taylor," a greasy pork chop of a kid whose blonde avatar earned him "blog of the day" honors.

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Strong Language

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In a war for Earth's survival, against an unrelenting enemy - the only way to defeat them, is to become one of them.
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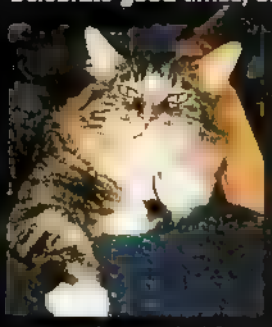
Annihilate the alien enemy with an arsenal of hi-tech weaponry
Compete online in fast action, arena-style multiplayer
...THE INVASION BEGINS
HOLIDAY 2005

EDITORIAL 257

SERIOUS FUN

Celebrate good times, come on!



OK, I HEAR YOU: "*WORLD OF WARCRAFT*...AGAIN? Dude—get a grip!" I know we've covered the game a lot in this magazine, but, hey, it's big. And this is the expansion. And I got to look at it before anybody else, so it not only is a great story, but also, more importantly, made me look cool to my daughter and her nerdy, *WOW*-obsessed middle-school friends.

But I do, in fact, play many other games, and as you can see in this month's reviews, there are lots of good ones to choose from. At the top of my list is the phenomenal *Indigo Prophecy*, the best adventure game in years and a sure bet for year-end accolades. You have to go way back to the brilliant *Sanitarium* (1998) to find an adventure game with this kind of emotional depth. Those lamenting the dearth of intelligent, sophisticated game design featuring an honest-to-goodness adult story line don't want to miss it. Buy it to encourage publishers to take more chances like Atari did here.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the joyful, brainless idiocy of *Serious Sam II*, which consciously dispenses with an intelligent story line for the sake of letting you blast monsters to smithereens, and Gearbox's solid, gritty *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood*, which proves that WWII games aren't dead yet, either—they just needs smart designers with fresh ideas.

I also just finished up and loved the single-player campaigns in *Dawn of War: Winter Assault* and sat with my kid and watched as she played the charming *Bone: Out From Boneville* for her first-ever CGW review. Yay nepotism!

Yes, the good games were coming out of our ears (literally!) this month. As such, it was a real joy to put this issue together (err, except for the deadline part). We hope you like it, too. Happy gaming!

/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *Indigo Prophecy, WOW, Dawn of War: Winter Assault*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

THE ANIMALS OF CGW

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

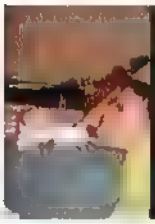
No, no Lonesome—don't get up. Kris knows you have it rough, what with all the sunbathing and hot-dog eating.

Now Playing: *Indigo Prophecy*, with your mind
1UP.com Blog: kristensa.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

Darren kills goldfish—you gonna trust him with a real, live pet? He has a Ninlendog, Maggie, instead.

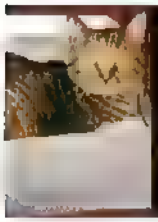
Now Playing: *Indigo Prophecy, Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood, Darwinia*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_glzmo.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS)

Aljin, 4 weeks old, is the runt of her litter. She also happens to be about the same size that baby Ryan was.

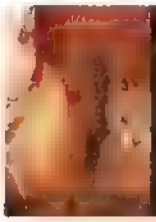
Now Playing: *Guild Wars, Indigo Prophecy, Shattered Union*
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com



SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

A $30 "Bed Buddies" cat bunk couldn't cut it. Puddy prefers to nap in her human Shawn's shoe box.

Now Playing: *Battlefield 2, Call of Duty 2, Day of Defeat: Source*
1UP.com Blog: cgmshawn.1UP.com



LOGAN PARR
DISC PRODUCER

Sam thinks she's a dog. She plays fetch and loves tummy rubs! Well, sure, but who doesn't?

Now Playing: *Indigo Prophecy, X-Men Legends II, The Suffering: Ties That Bind*
1UP.com Blog: [illegible].1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

This prowler is moody, like his dad. But scratch his ears right and you have a friend for life. Like his dad.

Now Playing: *Battlefield 2*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com

SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Lilly gets whatever she wants. She mainly enjoys doing the normal puppy things: sleeping, playing, eating my shoes.

Now Playing: *Battlefield 2*
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com

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GAMETAP

LETTERS

ISSUE 257

YOU'RE SO CUTE WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY

▲ Ben Schulz, aka Leeroy Jenkins, spotted in the wild.

FAKING THE FUNK

I've questioned Ben "Leeroy Jenkins" Schulz's [*CGW* #256] integrity for some time now. First, his [*World of WarCraft*] skit was obviously staged; you can see some idiot type "wipe time" in the text window. But what really concerns me is the racist undertone to the whole segment. Leeroy, it seems, is a black caricature (imagine a Mexican avatar called Paco Lopez) and he talks about chicken (equivalent to Paco yammering about tacos).

Why these clowns got more than 15 minutes of fame for a stupid skit while talented artists and amateur moviemakers are doing far more imaginative things within *World of WarCraft* is beyond me. But one thing is for sure: Schulz is not black.

Rcamacho

Bad news: You may not be done with Leeroy yet. Blizzard has hinted that he might be immortalized forever in *WoW*, as a ghost.

WET DREAM MACHINE

We've all seen crazy PC case mods, but this one takes the cheesecake. Stowage space for motion lotion, mags, and wet naps? Check, check, and check. Plus, it sports a side mirror and synthetic something or the other. Tap into it.

Chuck Perry

DIGITAL DEFAMATION

According to the "Pop Culture Pariah" story in your October issue [*CGW* #255], *CBS Evening News* claimed that "killing cops earns you points, not prison" in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Those of us who've played the game, however, know that if you harm the police, they hunt you, beat you, lock you up, and take away your loot. Why can't companies sue the media when they make such untrue statements? Celebs sue tabloids all the time.

Matt Waterman

Companies can sue, but they haven't so far, Matt. For the record, *GTA* maker Rockstar Games declined to comment on this.

BOLL-ING FOR DOLLARS

▲ Director Uwe Boll

Here I am, enjoying *CGW*, when suddenly I come across an article on how dud director Uwe Boll is "bringing his own special brand of magic to the *Dungeon Siege* movie." Are you jonesing to insult your readers or are you just clueless? Boll doesn't deserve free press! Did you see *Alone in the Dark*? The man has never played a game in his life, I swear it.

He's cheating us, taking something we care about and turning it into trash that he profits from. It's no less shameless than when companies make games from popular movies: Boll has just reversed the idea. Anyhow, heads up. Run the Boll interview you promised in your next issue and you'll lose the respect of your readers.

Justin

Thus concludes our broadcast from the Missing the Point Department. And since we've been sleeping on that Uwe Boll interview, we're including a snippet here, just for Justin.

CGW: Ever game?

Uwe Boll: In between but not during shoots. Right now I'm playing *Postal* on PC.

CGW: Gamer cred established! Rumor has it you're planning a *Postal* movie.

UB: Absolutely.

CGW: *Postal*'s controversial. How will you handle that with the film?

UB: We'll do it the same way! *Postal* is hilarious. I see it like *Falling Down*, but satirical—something you can actually laugh about. *Postal* is so successful and so fun, but you have to approach it with a smile on your face, and not like you're a racist or a friend of a masochist or a runner amok. An ironic tone is important. It could be interesting because it's a genre I've never done before, and it takes place in a shitty town and not in a fantasy world or something.

CGW: Fans weren't too fond of *Alone in the Dark*. Does that influence your future projects?

UB: On the Internet, 500 or so people are always pressing me about what an a**hole I am or whatever. But millions of people see these movies and send positive impressions, so I'm not overreacting to critics. And I'm happy with *Alone in the Dark*. I think the only weak part is Tara Reid's acting. The action is good, the creature is good, and the movie moves in fast-forward in the way that a videogame-based movie should.

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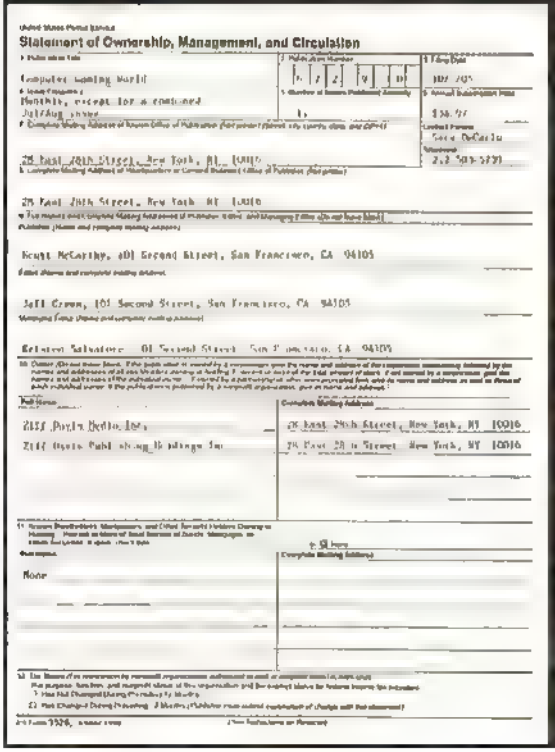

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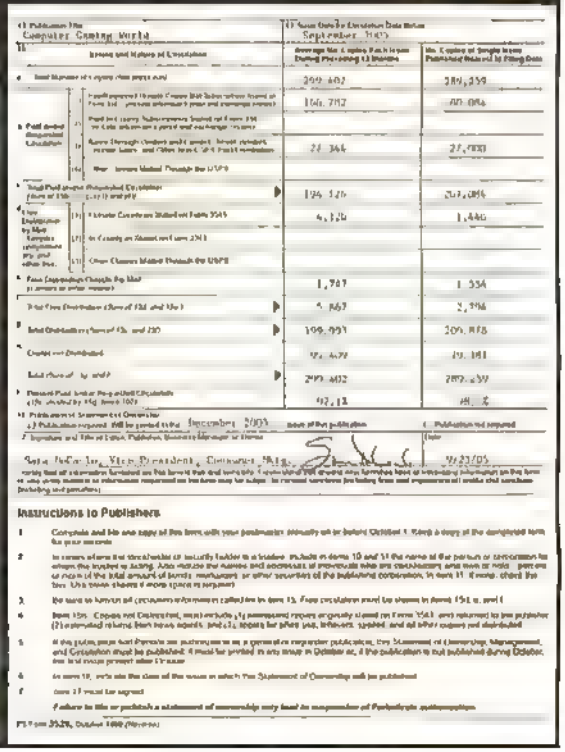

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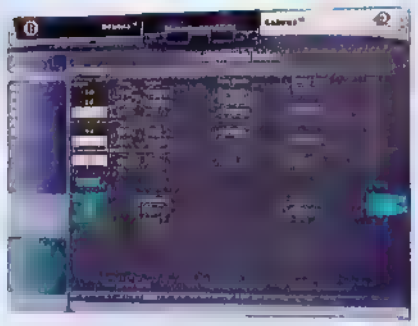

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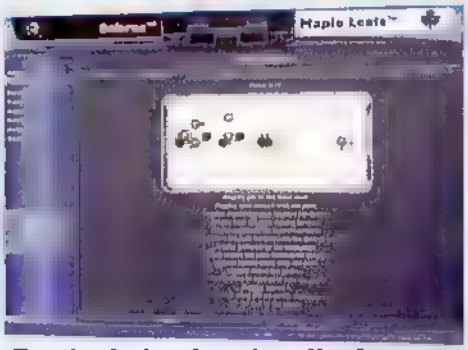

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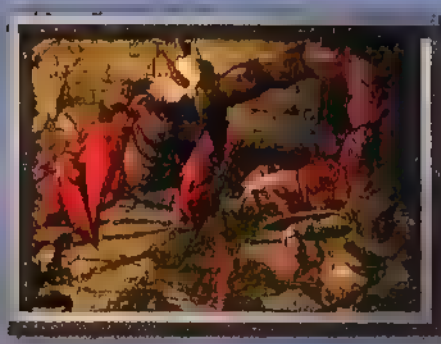

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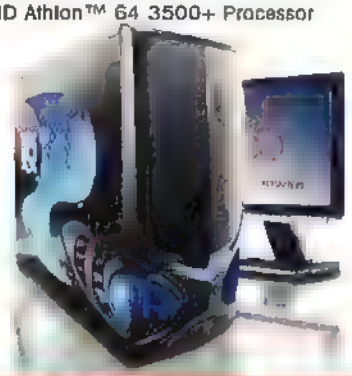

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BLACK MESA: SOURCE

Half-Life remake heads back to the lab with modder moxie

BASE GAME: **Half-Life 2** DEVELOPER: **Black Mesa: Source** GENRE: **Shooter** WEBSITE: **www.blackmesasource.com** RELEASE DATE: **When it's done**

THE INSIDE STORY

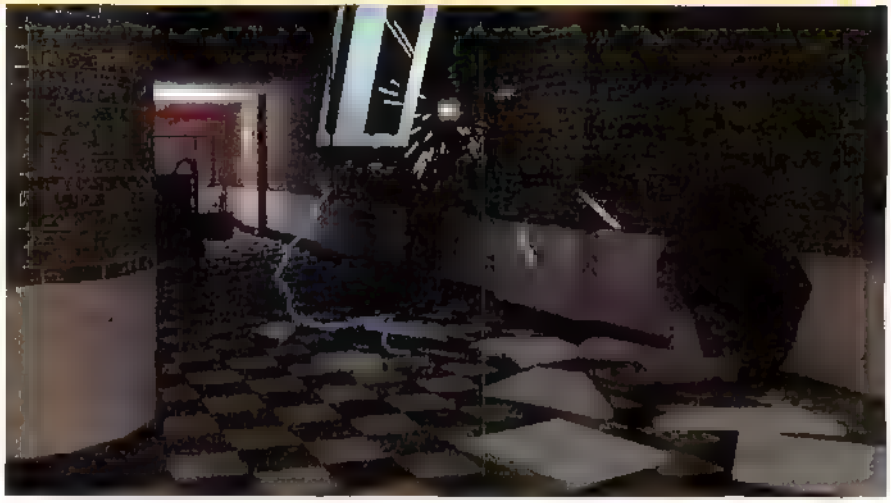
WITH WETTER WATER AND, WELL, NOT MUCH else new, *Half-Life: Source* was more rerelease than remake. A true top-to-bottom retooling of Valve's convention-changing 1998 sci-fi classic would have to come from the grass roots, a community project that was "not only possible," as Valve cofounder Gabe Newell had it, "but inevitable."

Instantly, and as if to answer the company's de facto challenge, two DIY modder groups marshaled forces to make it so. Leakfree formed in September 2004; the Half-Life: Source Overhaul Project materialized a month later. Both groups' goal: to rethink and reinvent the original *Half-Life* from the ground up. The race was on, although neither runner knew of the other's existence until Leakfree's project director, Jon Dominski, unknowingly began publicizing in the other outfit's HalfLife2.net forums. "Soon, I was talking to their project lead, Denzil," Dominski says, "and it seemed we shared the same goals, the same professionalism, and the same set of plans." The two teams agreed to reorganize and partner resources.

Now with 13 members and known as Black Mesa: Source, the guys got to work, ignoring an increasing number of online naysayers. "They said we were fated to fail, that the mod wouldn't last more than a few months," Dominski says. "But we knew we weren't making the thing to please particular people; we wanted to breathe new life into a game that we thought deserved it, but didn't get that with *Half-Life: Source*. And, as it turned out, all the outside negativity allowed us to function; once the distracting e-mails and the attention died up, we got the groundwork done, we got the grunt work done. We hit our first milestone, had something to show for ourselves, and when folks saw the time and effort that went into it all, they realized that we weren't going to get up and walk away."

"S**, they're actually gonna do this," commented one former critic.

When the criticism became constructive, the team turned to the community to spot mistakes it might otherwise miss. "We started copying every comment we could find and pasting them in our private forums. For example, gun nuts (pardon the term) said that the M4 wasn't right, so we started a second stage of research and reworked that. But it works internally, too. One of the first things we ask Black Mesa: Source applicants is,



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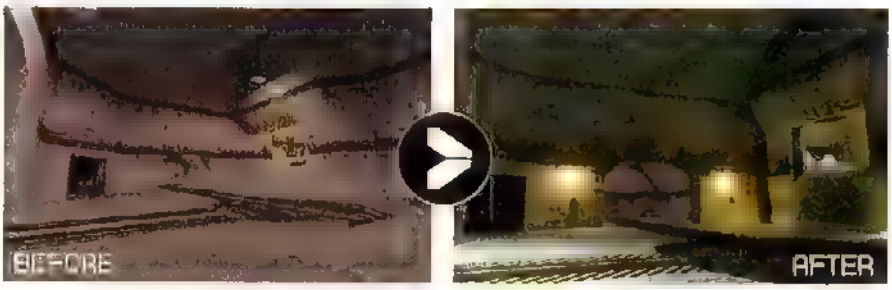


"WHILE WE AREN'T IN IT FOR THE FAME AND FORTUNE, IT WOULD BE AN HONOR IF VALVE SOFTWARE NOTICED US AND ANNOUNCED *BLACK MESA* IN ONE OF ITS STEAM UPDATES."

--PROJECT DIRECTOR JON DOMINSKI

'Can you take constructive criticism well?' We tell people straight up, 'We're going to nitpick, we're going to tear apart your level, model, sound, code, or texture. It's nothing personal, though. It's all in the name of quality and professionalism.'"

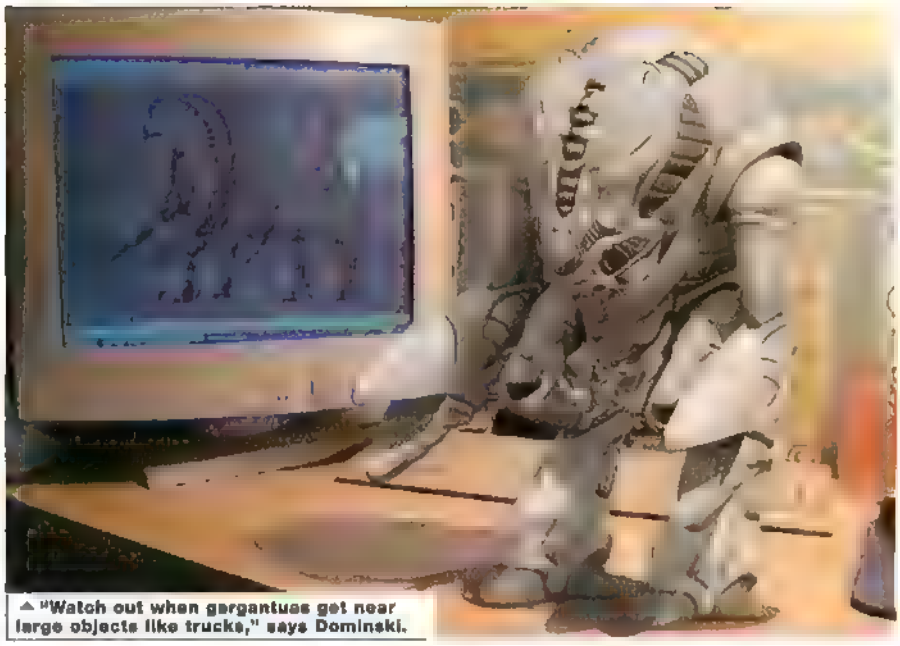
Not tied to any one office, the nonprofit project is composed of Americans, Brits, Canadians, Aussies, Norwegians, Germans, and Slovakians between the ages of 13 and 33. ("The love of *Half-Life* has no borders," as Dominski has it.) No two team members have ever met face to face—according to Dominski, conceptual artist Brian Dale came close to meeting one of the modelers while shooting research photos in the Nevada desert—and yet, tied together by forum talk and powwows on Internet telephone service Skype, they're all inseparable.

HELLO AGAIN, MR. FREEMAN

"In *Half-Life*, characters could repeat themselves endlessly, and it was this sort of comical thing," mused Valve writer/director Marc Laidlaw in *CGW*'s October issue. "You know, you'd leave Barney in one room, and there he'd be in the next. We're in a different world now."

Black Mesa: Source's modders got the message. Rerecording dialogue and producing two to three dozen different scientists and security guards, they've relegated the can-do rent-a-cop to the role he played in the in-his-own-eyes *Blue Shift* expansion. "That means that you'll now see Barney fighting on security monitors at some points," says Dominski, "as he never worked with [*Half-Life* hero] Gordon Freeman in *BS*. However, none of the fans will let us forget that every 'Barney' in *Half-Life* said, 'Catch me later, I'll buy you a beer,' so we're leaving a note in Gordon's locker about the brew that Barney owes him."

See it as a sort of *Star Wars* trilogy tinkering, Lucas shuffling scenes post-prequel, adding something here, removing a snippet there, except here the editors and directors are *Half-Life*'s fans. Tellingly, story matters as much as light and magic. "Realizing that Dr. Breen was the facility administrator—as opposed to the G-man—cleared a lot of things up for us," Dominski says. "We won't mention his name directly, but we'll insert references to the administrator switching the test sample to the highly pure Xen crystal that caused all the commotion. Also, with [*Half-Life 2* heroine] Alyx now in the picture, we're bringing that bit into play by giving [her father] Eli this sense of urgency that he has to help save his family."



▲ "Watch out when gargantuas get near large objects like trucks," says Dominski.

▲ The Black Mesa compound...from concept art to near-complete in-game graphics.

> SEE IT AS A SORT OF *STAR WARS* TRILOGY TINKERING, LUCAS SHUFFLING SCENES POST-PREQUEL, EXCEPT HERE THE EDITORS AND DIRECTORS ARE *HALF-LIFE*'S FANS.

Other embellishments include new brainteasers and better enemy behavior. ' While we aren't adding the gravity gun—it wasn't a weapon in *Half-Life*, and it won't appear in *Black Mesa*," Dominski says, "physics certainly give us the power to generate more 'Source-ified' puzzles. Remember the part right after you escape the trash compactor, where you break into the houndeye cages and beat 'em back with your crowbar? Now, instead of making you shoot an electrical box to open the path, we've placed physics objects for you to stack and climb over. Only then can you get to the generator and unlock the gate."

As for the guys who are out to get you, Dominski says the *Black Mesa* crew is working from *HL2*'s Combine code: "The big change is that Marines will create barricades and improvised cover—they'll leap from ledges, try to outmaneuver and trap you." He also admits that his A.I. programmers have yet to achieve these aspirations, but if it happens, they'll have more corks to pop. "We have 'The Plan': On the night of *Black Mesa: Source*'s release, we're getting together—all 35 of us—and going on a drunken spree through the streets of Las Vegas." Perhaps they'll treat the team's underage members to Excalibur's Tournament of Kings. **Shawn Elliott**

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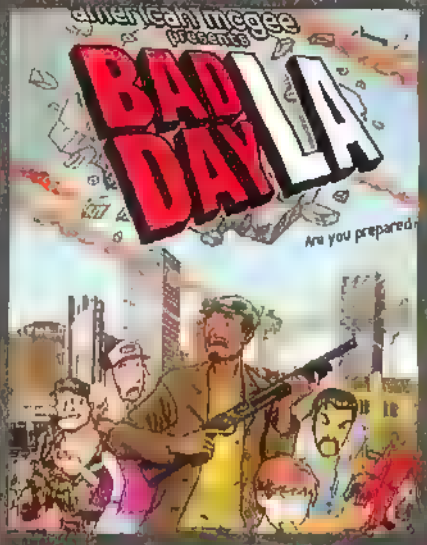
AMERICAN MADE

Knocking back drinks, talking politics, and making a game in China—it's just another night for American McGee

American McGee, between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m.



INTERVIEWING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

IT STARTED INNOCENTLY ENOUGH—a couple of drinks at some hipster restaurant, some dirty looks from an uptight couple at another table, and a demo of *Bad Day L.A.* American McGee—of id Software and *Alice* fame (not so much for *Scrapland*)—was just planning to show off his incendiary new game. That is, until someone started ordering tequila.
/Darren Gladstone

CGW: So what exactly is the deal with *Bad Day L.A.*? You've got cartoony graphics but lots of messed-up violence going on here.

American McGee: The important thing to remember about this game is that it is meant as a comedy. *Bad Day L.A.* is tongue-in-cheek about everything from videogames themselves to violence and disasters. The hope here is that we can talk about a generally sensitive subject like disasters but also combine that with other issues and just make fun of the whole thing—about how ridiculous all the crap we deal with really is. The art style is meant to kind of deflect the serious nature of all the stuff that's going on. Basically, think of *Bad Day L.A.* in the same vein as a *South Park* or *Family Guy*.

[He fires up his notebook and the game begins. The opening scene shows the game's hero, Anthony, an African-American who is homeless by choice. As he crosses a traffic-choked L.A. road, someone shouts, "Get off the freeway, ya retard!" As payback, Anthony unbuttons his pants and proceeds to, um, make an off-camera deposit on the guy's car.]

CGW: Wow. You don't see that every day.
AM: [*Laughing*] You've never seen a videogame start like this before?

CGW: You kidding? Some of my mornings have started out that way. After seeing this though, I am curious how this is going to be different from *Postal 2* [which earned a zero-star rating from *CGW* for bad taste and bugs].

[In the game, a plane crash-lands and explodes on the 405 freeway. Cars explode and chaos breaks out.]

AM: The goal with this game is not that you're supposed to go around killing people, pissing off people, setting them all on fire. That is completely against the rules in this game. And for the inevitable *Grand Theft Auto* comparison: This game doesn't advocate violence toward innocent people, rape, drugs...we don't use the N-word and there's no sexual content whatsoever. There's a difference here, which is...OK, so watch this. The first weapon I get is this fire extinguisher. When I use the fire extinguisher on somebody and save them, I get a smiley face. This game is about being socially acceptable. Even though our main character is a maniac, even though the game seems pretty sexist and pretty racist, it's really not. People don't complain about *Chappelle's Show* or *Saturday Night Live*. There's a clear delineation between positive acts and negative acts. And the whole game revolves around this right here [he points to the threat advisory meter].

So a bad thing just happened and a black frowny went up, right? The threat advisory is your karma meter. If you let stuff get out of

THIS GAME ISN'T ABOUT KILLING PEOPLE OR PISSING PEOPLE OFF. IN FACT, IT PUNISHES YOU FOR DOING THE WRONG THING

"Can't we all just get along?" Apparently not when everything goes wrong in L.A.

control—whether you're doing the wrong thing or nothing at all to help—the game basically just becomes more and more difficult to the point of not being playable. It kills you. You're balancing your forward movement toward your ultimate goal of trying to escape the city with having to help people. You absolutely have to, but the funny part of it is that the main character doesn't want to help anybody. He'll come across characters who are like, "Please help us. These guys are trying to hurt us." And he'll look at them and go, "So run the f*** away." He says to them what you would say to them in a situation like that. Then, of course, he'll grudgingly help. Anthony's just a little bit more of a real character than your typical gung ho, trying-to-save-everybody type.

CGW: You reference *South Park*, but it has absurd humor—a talking Christmas poo as opposed to a guy pissing on a car. While based in reality, *South Park* isn't nearly as "real" as this. Isn't that a problem?

AM: People stay away from *South Park* because it's obviously satire. It makes fun of everyone equally. We're trying to do the same here. Still, videogames are an easy target for the politicians and for their constituents because it's safe, because there is no videogame lobby. There is no understanding of videogames as an art form or as, actually, a proper form of media at all. And, you know, if you are Hillary Clinton, it is safer to go out and talk bad about videogames. Try attacking films or music and you've got a problem. What kind of trouble are they going to get in for demonizing games? None. It's total bulls**t.

CGW: But don't you think that you're just giving ammunition to the Hillary Clintons and the Jack Thompsons of the world? They'll wind up attacking you.

AM: You know what? I hope they do. This game was born out of my frustrations. This game deals with the political nature of fear, of the war, of race issues, of all these things today. I would like nothing more than to go on television with Hillary Clinton and look her in the eye and go, "Wait a second. You want to tell me that you want to ban my videogame—or you don't accept the fact that it's available for people who are 18 and over—and yet you go on record saying you want to send more kids to Iraq? And they start enlisting before they're 17 years old—before they can even buy a videogame where we simulate violence, you want to send them off to war?"

CGW: So you're calling out Hillary and Jack, eh? Well, I hear you already have some people that aren't taking the subject matter well.

AM: Yeah. We're getting some letters from

RUSH HOUR

Five things to know about *Bad Day L.A.*

1 The game is really simple. McGee's goal, in an age of *Splinter Cells*, is to make something that anyone can grasp. That's why the instruction manual looks like an airline safety card. Seriously.

2 Don't punish the players. There's a super-easy mode that resurrects you right after you die.

3 The most powerful weapon in the game: nail clippers. "You don't realize they're a weapon until you get to the airport and get searched. Use the BDLA 9000 to clip a nail and it wipes out everything in sight."

4 How many things can go wrong in one day? Apparently, 10 major incidents. The first level has pillars crashing and a toxin-produced zombie apocalypse.

5 Four sidekicks follow you throughout the game: a sick zombie kid that pukes (he's good against normal humans), Juan (his chain saw is good against zombies), "the Sergeant" (he quotes Dubya as he goes ballistic), and Beverly (think Paris Hilton—she distracts foes, then slices her Chihuahua on 'em).

The ultimate weapon in the game: nail clippers. Airport security was right!

the Los Angeles mayor's office and the hate crimes legislator, just based on the fact that everything happens in Los Angeles. What the hell, it'll be good practice.

CGW: [*Laughs*] That's when they ran you out of L.A. and you moved to Hong Kong?

AM: [*Laughs*] I actually fooled myself into believing that I could live in Los Angeles and make a game in Hong Kong and in China. And I ended up moving there because I was way f***in' wrong. You give me the list of things you have to get right when you're making a game. That is the list of things they were doing wrong. I s*** you not.

CGW: Had these guys ever made games?

AM: Let's put it like this: The engine that they were using to make this game was an "isometric view RPG engine." It's now a third-person action-adventure title. It was sort of turn-based. Now it's real time. Take the art direction. They don't know how to do anything other than photo-realism. We gave them a tremendous amount of art and tried to tell them: "Here's how to make this game look right." And what we were getting back was literally them going out and taking pictures of cars in China, scanning them in and slapping them on the set of the game. They drew a black outline around a car! That doesn't count! [*Laughing*] I seriously doubt that any publisher in their right mind would have financed this game, in the U.S., anywhere. They just wouldn't have done it. I cannot begin to make a list of all the things that went wrong and were tough. Everything was hard, and everything went wrong.

CGW: So you take all these jobs overseas and deal with these hassles. How does it compare to here?

AM: U.S. game development teams are really creative, brilliant, innovative—and they're really headstrong. A guy that I'd hire to be a junior artist would try to force an idea into a game and hijack the production, throwing a major monkey wrench into the process. That's the Western development team. It's the opposite with the Chinese team. If you come up with a good idea and you give them good direction, they'll stamp it out. Problem is, they will not deviate a f***in' inch from what I say. So the challenge is coming up with enough of a good idea, and...like, I find my days are now 80 percent just giving directions. And it's really frustrating and really annoying and boring, but it works. Otherwise, I've had people following orders until there was nothing else to do. They just sit there and stare at the screen.

CGW: And do what?

AM: Nothing! They're f***in' frozen.

CGW: Are there any benefits, at least?

AM: Well, there is one obvious one. Labor is incredibly cheap in China and Hong Kong.

CGW: OK, Kathie Lee Gifford...

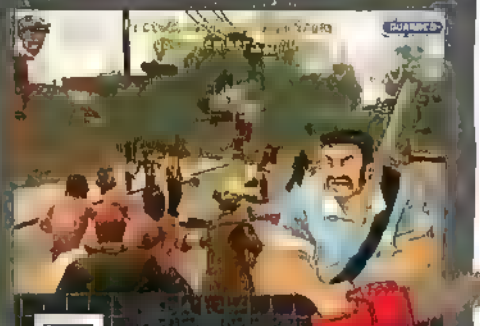
AM: Hey, that's normal. It's not like we're doing something that everybody else doesn't do. And what it means is that *Bad Day L.A.* has 120 unique NPC characters in it. That's a lot of unique models and unique animations. That's a lot of art assets.

CGW: Yeah, you know, that's pretty damn cool. Hey, wanna get one more round?

AM: What the hell? Sure.

[Things get fuzzy here. I'm just wondering why I woke up on top of a 12-inch cheesesteak sandwich—and whether it's still OK to eat.]

'I'VE HAD PEOPLE FOLLOWING ORDERS UNTIL THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO DO. THEY'D JUST STARE AT THE SCREEN.'



AMERICAN MCGEE'S EPISODIC ADVENTURES

He's even talking beyond *Bad Day L.A.*

Maybe it was the booze that loosened him up, but he's not even done with *Bad Day L.A.* and McGee is already thinking big for his next project.

"This concept is to throw old crap out the window—no more consumption of games in the typical sense of how we do it. It'll be like television: weekly, episodic. Some companies are starting to talk about doing this, but you're just paying for an online expansion. I'm still trying to figure this all out, but the basic idea is to structure single-player episodes like *Lost*—with weekly cliff-hangers.

"Now imagine being able to get that cliff-hanger every week, but then when the episode is over, you're able to go and run around the world. Outside of the episodes, [players are] free to explore an entire world. Like *Zelda*: There's fishing, there's rock bashing, there's cave exploring, there's diving. There are all these things to do. Some expand the story, some don't. They own the world for free, and the episodes unlock new tools to have fun inside of the world. And then, if you want to play the next episode, it'll only cost you a dollar.

"It's basically what you sort of do in *Grand Theft Auto*, but spread out on an episodic-content basis and with specific hooks to keep you coming back every week to watch. When that half-hour or 45-minute segment is over, you've played the game to the cliff-hanger and then [you're] back in the game world. You've got control of your character again, but the cliff-hanger's still hanging out there.

"You'll be able to walk around the world and talk to people and get a little bit of insight into the episode. Never enough to give away the next episode, but enough to make you need to see the next one."

BAD DAY ONLINE

Thank God we recorded everything! Want to know more about his experiences working at EA and his thoughts on the industry, and hear more random cursing? It's only at 1UP.com.

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*Based on performance testing in Battlefield

PRINCE OF PERSIA:

PUBLISHER **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER **Ubisoft** RELEASE DATE **December 2005**

PREVIEW

ROYALTY BREEDS SCANDAL, AND the battle-scarred Prince of Persia is no exception. Troubles have stalked the poor lad for 15 years, and in the last three alone, his hubris helped unleash the deadly Sands of Time, resulting in the monster Dahaka's relentless pursuit of our princely Warrior Within. [illegible] deteriorate anyone's charm school training, but an unprotected encounter with the Sands of Time has now given rise to the Prince's own "devil on his shoulder," as producer Ben Mattes describes the Dark Prince, a playable doppelgänger living in the Prince and striving for dominance over him in the upcoming *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*. Expect the struggle between the Prince and his inner dark self to drive most of the game. "A lot of the twists and turns in *The Two Thrones* come in the form of [illegible] development as opposed to plot elements," Mattes. "Surprises come from learning who our characters are and what they're planning—not so much *how* they're going to accomplish their respective missions." So, who are these two princes, and what are they planning? Behold, your guide. /Kristen Salvatore

WEAPONRY

The trusty Dagger of Time remains the Prince's weapon of choice, though he can pick up other weapons and engage in some two-handed slashing.

CARRIAGE

The Prince may appear more outwardly charming than his nasty counterpart, but he's no Mary Poppins. "We all have to wrestle with weakness and insecurity," Mattes says. "His just happens to take the form of another playable character. The franchise has established the Sands as a powerful and destructive force that infects those who come in contact with them, twisting them physically, mentally, emotionally. So we asked ourselves, what if the Prince finds himself slowly being brought under their influence? What is it like to find yourself becoming the very thing you've spent a good portion of your life trying to destroy?"

ACROBATICS

Still nimble, the Prince has practically patented the art of the wall walk. [illegible] moves will be critical [illegible] working in cooperation with the Dark Prince will get him to places he might not otherwise reach.

COMBAT

Employ the [illegible] perform [illegible] Expect surprise decapitations and stealthy leaps ending in single-blow kills.

THE TWO THRONES

DARK PRINCE

A "corrupt" version of the Prince, the Dark Prince personifies all the Prince's less savory traits: He delights in violence, he is reckless and rude, and morality is not his forte. He also believes himself to be the rightful heir to the throne of Babylon—which means he and the Prince are pursuing the same goal.

SIAMESE SOUL MATES

TIME SHIFTING

The Prince and Dark Prince do have one thing in common: They share the ability to shift time, which is quite handy when you've just missed the ledge you were aiming to jump to.

SWITCH

Switching between the two princes isn't entirely within your control. "Moments of sudden crisis turn the Prince into the Dark Prince. In order to calm these moments of crisis and return to normal, the Prince must seek out the healing properties of the Water of Life," explains Mattes.

DUEL?

Will the two princes ultimately face off in a duel for the throne (and, ostensibly, the body they share)? "I [illegible] to play the game to find out," says Mattes. Oh!

WEAPONRY

The Dark Prince's Daggertail is "a powerful, chainlike, midrange weapon with which he will be able to perform spectacular grabs, direct attacks, and combos," says Mattes. He'll also use the Dagger of Time for close combat and to finish off enemies stung by the Daggertail.

CARRIAGE

"The Dark Prince is a corrupt version of the Prince, a personification of the Prince's darker personality traits: ruthless, reckless, and inconsiderate," says Mattes. Watch for this attitude to come through in his dialogue—although it's not all hisses and spits. "If he wants the Prince to listen to him, he's got to be a little bit charming," Mattes explains. "He can also be quite helpful; he will often provide the Prince with advice and direction, helping to keep him focused on the mission at hand."

COMBAT

The Dark Prince benefits from this game's use of *Warrior Within*'s freedom [illegible] emphasizes creativity in combat, says Mattes. His speed kills and smashing moves "will reflect his furious and brutal personality in every way."

ACROBATICS

"The Daggertail is not just a deadly weapon," [illegible] Prince can use it to [illegible] environment in a very efficient and acrobatic way to access places the Prince cannot."

STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR

▲ "Red Leader, this is Red Six. Sir, I think we're pretty much screwed here."

▲ If C-3PO were here, he'd probably rattle off something about the odds of successfully surviving an attack on an Imperial Star Destroyer.

PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS DEVELOPER: PETROGLYPH GENRE: RTS RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 2006

GIVEN THE EPIC, BIG-BANG SPACE battles that define the *Star Wars* films, one wonders why the franchise suffers such harrowing problems whenever someone tries to make a strategy game out of the series. *Rebellion* and *Force Commander* stand as two of the most infamous missteps in *Star Wars*' troubled PC gaming history, and *Galactic Battlegrounds*—while decent—amounts to little more than *Age of Empires II* in a *Star Wars* costume. Then again, these games miss the point altogether: There's nothing epic or cinematic about them.

Much like the last half hour of *Episode III* (Vader's ridiculous "NOOOOO!!!" notwithstanding), there is a light at the end of this bleak tunnel. Petroglyph's *Star Wars: Empire at War* brings the films' breakneck space battles into the RTS realm in a whole new way. Starships zoom about the outer space environments, engaged in tense dogfights. Imperial Star Destroyers explode into multiple scattered fragments. And the world-destroying Death Star—let's just say it's a force to be reckoned with. Over 40 planets from the films and novels make appearances in *Empire at War*'s campaign, which bridges much of the gap between the post–*Episode III* years and the destruction of the first Death Star.

In addition to setting the stage for some fast-paced land battles, these planets also provide steady income, which helps to tighten your grip on the galaxy even further. Planets generate credits, credits buy additional units, and units help you to capture more planets. Not your everyday resource-management system—but a creative use of the source material nonetheless. With any luck, these unique design elements will come together to finally make a *Star Wars* strategy game that's more *Empire Strikes Back* and less *The Phantom Menace*. /**Ryan Scott**

BIG-SCREEN STRATEGY

Bringing epic film battles home

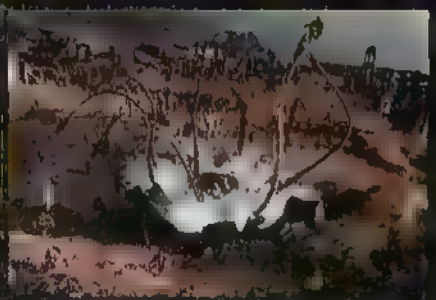
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: EALA GENRE: RTS RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 2006

LORD OF THE RINGS FANATICS FALL into two broad camps: those who enjoy the films based on JRR Tolkien's classic fantasy trilogy, and those who endlessly nitpick over the creative liberties the filmmakers took with these silver-screen adaptations. Now, everyone gets the best of both mediums, as Electronic Arts' upcoming real-time strategy sequel, *The Battle for Middle-earth II*, blends the cinematic *LOTR* world with expanded fiction drawn from the books...meaning that all the obsessive fanboys who have been crying for Tom Bombadil and Glorfindel the elf-lord can finally shut the hell up.

But despite this seeming marriage between book and film, many of *BFME2*'s key features read like a standard array of RTS enhancements. Three additional factions (dwarves, elves, and goblins) join the battle; new units and heroes (Wormtongue, Arwen, Elrond, and others) pop up; and two original campaigns (the ubiquitous "good" and "evil" modes) take players to locations not seen in the movies. At first glance, it looks like a glorified expansion pack—but several alterations to the gameplay might help to placate those in the hardcore RTS community who snubbed the original *BFME* for its relative simplicity.

The most immediately apparent change: no more predetermined base layouts. *BFME2* conforms to the "build anywhere" RTS standard, giving you the freedom to structure your headquarters as you see fit. Unit A.I. gets some tweaks and improvements as well; armies now move in intelligent formations, and situational attack bonuses reward clever tactical maneuvers (such as flanking). And to top it off, you can even create your own custom hero unit from the ground up. The only big question is...how much steam is really left in this franchise now that the movies are long gone? /**Ryan Scott**



▲ The Watcher, aka that one water monster from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

▲ A group of goblin spider riders about to make a heaping helping of dwarf-kabobs.

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PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Stardock

PUBLIC ACCESS

...nger on the pul... ...PC-gam... ...nge culture

GAMEMAKERS MAKE THE GAMES. WE BUY THEM. BUT WHAT happens next isn't necessarily what anyone expects, especially when a game goes online. / Shawn Elliott

Although artist Nick Bertke admits he's "mostly attempting to master light matching," he also "goes for the same effect you get in the game: washed out, threatening, and atmospheric."

HALF-LIFE-LIKE

HOMESPUN

ROBO-POOCH DOG PLAYS IN THE STREET. Combine, *Half-Life 2*'s otherworldly oppressors, loaf in Ikea-furnished flats and dawdle on manicured lawns. But artist Nick Bertke is more interested in lifelike lighting than the banality of everyday despotism.

Originally pegged as the effects guru for a group producing a homespun *Half-Life 2* movie, Bertke began experimenting with stills—and continues to do so, even after financial hang-ups scuttled the film project. "Reality caught up with us," he says. "Apparently, a budget isn't optional...it's critical."

Bertke's time-intensive process begins with a background photo and involves, among other things, "measuring camera height, the angle the camera faces, and also lens width, and then applying these statistics to a CG camera to ensure that things match up as well as possible." Next, he creates a CG sheet of the same proportions and applies models from *Half-Life 2* to that. "Then I overlay the CG sheet on the [photographic] one and alter the camera's rotation and angle until the former fits perfectly over the latter," he explains. Bertke then does some additional tinkering in *HDR Shop* (a high-dynamic range image processing and manipulation program). He says, "It's just a process of altering things such as color and contrast until I have what looks like a perfect and convincing composite. I'm mostly attempting to master light matching."

We like to look at it as a window into a trompe l'oiel tomorrow where game graphics delight and deceive with the same drama.

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WE WANT YOU

Going to great lengths for love of the game? Send your community's story to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com, subject: Public Access.

COMBINE, *HALF-LIFE 2*'S OPPRESSORS, LOAF IN IKEA-FURNISHED FLATS

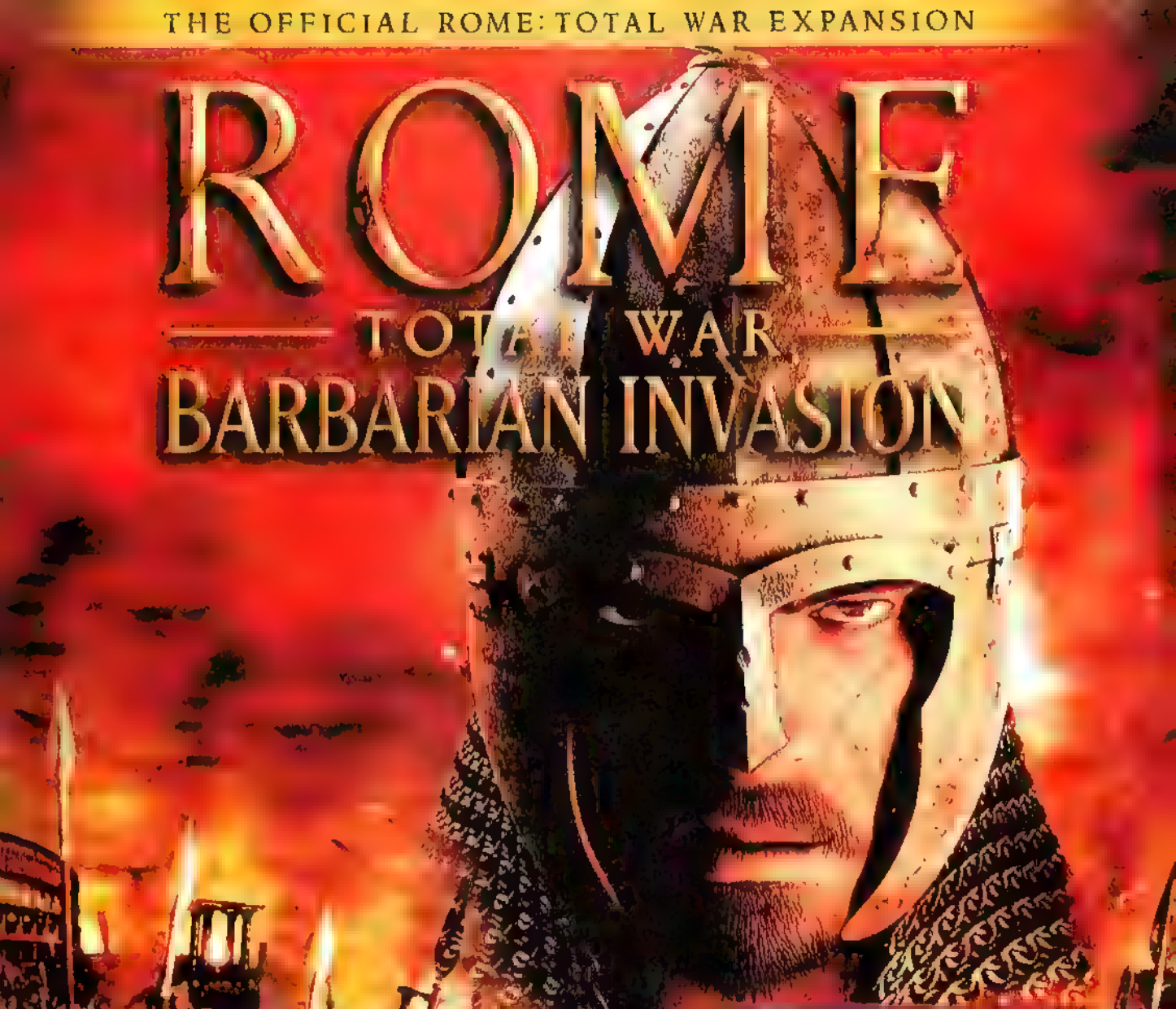
TOO HOT FOR CD

When *CGW* last spoke with Garry Newman (*CGW* #251), the man behind *Garry's Mod* confessed that of all the things people demand from his *Half-Life 2*-based building program, "Everyone seems to want a nude Alyx, although I won't guess what for." "Perhaps it's—well, duh—porn," we offered, the dirty secret that drives so much new technology.

Enter Digital_Utopia: This weird scientist (and likely buffet line champion) wasn't about to leave his sex life (or lack thereof) in Newman's not-so-naughty hands—so he did it himself. His mod-of-a-mod love child, *Alyx Nude*, lets pervs manipulate the in-the-buff model so they can... do whatever it is that pervs do. /

THE OFFICIAL ROME: TOTAL WAR EXPANSION

ROME
TOTAL WAR
BARBARIAN INVASION



DARKNESS FALLS...

It is 363 AD and the last Emperor of the unified Roman world is dead. His successors now rule a divided Empire. Each calls himself supreme ruler and each would happily see the other dead. Beyond the frontiers of the sundered realm new enemies are lurking. This will be a sword-time – an age that is arrow-bitten and deadly. The Barbarians are at the gates in the official expansion pack for Rome: Total War.

- A brand new campaign game
- 10 new playable factions – defend and unite the Eastern and Western Empires, or burn them to the ground as one of 10 new factions, including the Huns, Franks, Saxons and Goths
- 100+ new units – each with their own tactical strengths, weapons and abilities, including Schiltrons and Shieldwall formations, swimming and axe-throwing, crossbows and Carroballistae
- Barbarian Hordes – march your entire people in search of a new homeland

You were there for Rome's glory. This September you can be there for the Empire's fall.

RP — Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

TOTAL WAR

The Creative Assembly

Requires original Rome: Total War game to run

SEGA
www.sega.com

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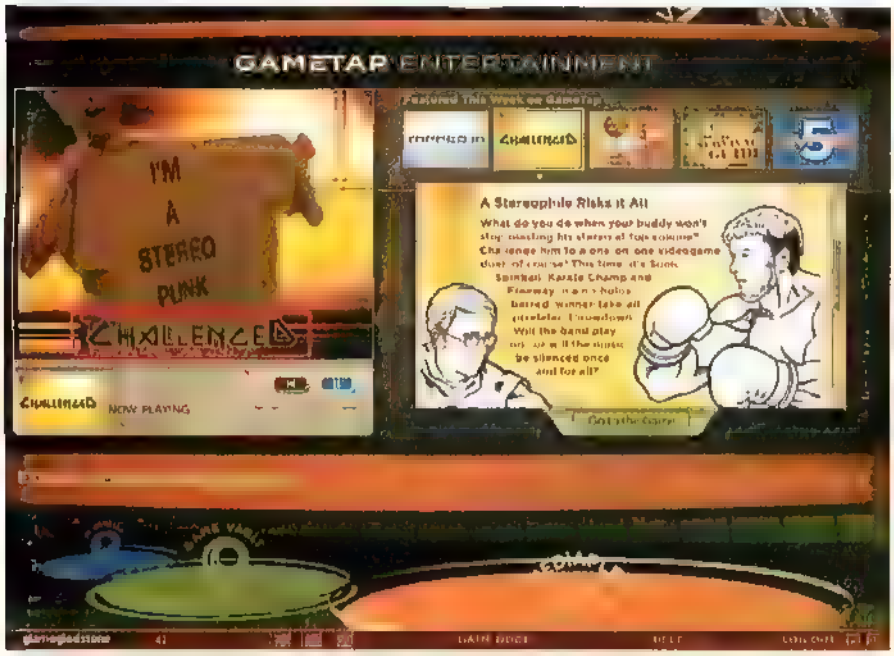
VIDEODROME

Turner Broadcasting's new wave of interactive entertainment



▲ A whole network of shows on your PC? As strange as it sounds, yes.

DESK-CHAIR POTATO

HOW DO YOU SUM UP GAMETAP? IT'S not a TV network or an online gaming site, but a hybrid service somewhere in between. Instead of vegging out in front of the boob tube, you're at the PC with access to hundreds of games through this $15/month games-on-demand service. Turner Broadcasting, the force behind GameTap, has smartly cherry-picked some of the better titles of past years, but it also draws largely from a stable of classic arcade, Atari, Dreamcast, Intellivision, Genesis, Master System, and PlayStation games (the notable omissions here are current-generation games and titles for Nintendo platforms).

The innovative part is how Turner is also incorporating aspects of TV programming directly into an interactive medium. Whether you're waiting for a game to download onto your PC or you just want to explore the service's MediaPlex, a channel-like repository for GameTap's video content, you have access to a host of exclusive new content you can easily navigate with a keyboard and mouse or even a gamepad. The new content isn't just a couple quick video strategy guides—we're talking network-caliber programming put together by guys who helped create Cartoon Network's Adult Swim. Most shows look interesting; some fall under the "meh!" category, but it's worth your time to check out the quick rundown of GameTap's fall "season," to the right.

Darren Gladstone

FALL SCHEDULE

TAPPED IN
Host Kathy Keats explores the stories behind games. GameTap also promises to look at classic gems. Every episode includes insider gameplay tips and tricks. This could actually be good.

FAME & GAME (WORKING TITLE)
We're a little limp on this one. *Fame & Game* goes to mansions, movie-set trailers, tour buses, and recording studios to see where celebrities are playing videogames and what they're playing. Who cares?

CHALLENGED
This is a reality show in which friends settle grudges by competing in best-of-three videogame tournaments. Ryan Scott will be taking on all comers in *Street Fighter*.

THE CLASS OF...?
This pop-culture clip show revisits the trends, stars, hits, events, and games of years gone by, challenging viewers to guess when it all happened. If this becomes an interactive quiz show, we could be down.

HYPER 5
People sure love those countdown shows. How else can you explain VH1's success? Melissa Ponzio counts down different gaming categories, like five truly bad bosses, five really painful BBQs, and five wicked-deadly ninja weapons. How about five reasons to watch this?

GAMETAP SURVIVAL GUIDE
An experienced gamer teaches a novice how to level up. This could be a good way to present a strategy guide or walkthrough.

SPACE GHOST COAST TO COAST
Our favorite superhero talk show host is back. This time, Space Ghost interviews the who's who of the videogame world—and anyone else dumb enough to sit in the hot seat.

TV SHORTS

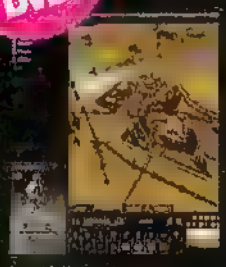
POET LAUREATE OF GAMES
Videogame aficionados can be poets, too. Yep, we can't wait for the *Half-Life* haiku to come rolling in.

A DAY IN THE EXTRA LIFE
Find out what game "extra lives" do while waiting on the sidelines. The few shorts that are online are kinda funny.

VIDEO GAME SHOWDOWN
"It's the ultimate showdown, videogame style. Boxers and briefs square off to decide, finally, who is the king of all male undergarments." Um, yeah.

TRY IT ON OUR DVD!

BF2 ADVANCED TACTICAL CENTER



IT HAPPENS. THIRTY seconds into a scrim, and the other side overwhelms your outposts, blows your bridges, scraps your artillery, and steals your assets. Then, enveloped, you eat bombs and fire and all the big-bang ordnance the enemy can expend in the flashing seconds before the egg timer tracking your dwindling tickets rings the round dead and done. How did they do it? Could be, they use Advanced Tactical Center for *Battlefield 2*.

The community tool—on our disc and downloadable at www.foolishentertainment.com—lets clans create and coordinate tactics in real time (and on their own time) away from the game. ATC's flexible interface functions like an NFL playmaker and makes marking up overview images of *BF2*'s 12 official maps easy. The trick, of course, is to prevent your best-laid plans from going awry in action (see the scenario below).

PLAN: Stream down Karkand's side streets, flank MEC forces, and appropriate their armor.

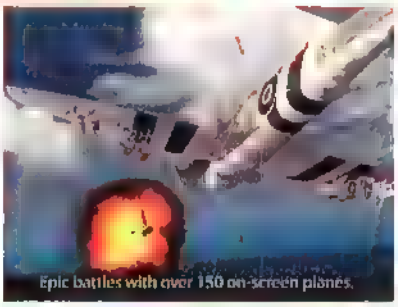
ACTION: Throw yourselves in front of the first friendly Humvee that passes while hitting Page Down to punish the team kill.

/ Shawn Elliott

HEROES of the PACIFIC

Join the great pilots of the Pacific

AVAILABLE NOW



www.heroesofthepacific.com

TEEN T Violence Strong Language

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

XBOX LIVE

PlayStation.2

ONLINE

UBISOFT

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SCHOOLS OF

The newest crop of fantasy games, from new-school shooters to old-school dungeon crawls.

NEW SCHOOL>>>

A new suit of fantasy games is in the cards—one that sports the usual dungeons, dragons, and Tolkien trappings but also boldly ventures beyond tried-and-true roleplaying and real-time strategy. Think alchemical mash-ups that are as much *Battlefield* as *Battle for Middle-earth*, equal parts *Doom* and *Diablo*. And—in the case of *Hellgate: London*, *Savage 2*, and *Dark Messiah*—fantasy on a first-person scale, where monsters scrape the skies and spells fire from your own fingertips, but where stat building, bauble hoarding, and storytelling still matter.

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios GENRE: First-Person Action RELEASE DATE: Summer 2006

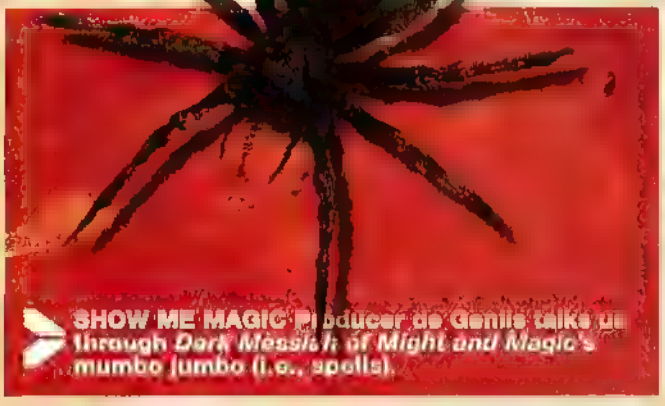
SWORDS, SORCERY, AND SHADOWS—first-person action-adventure *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* rolls all three fantasy-rack favorites into one. Depending on whether you grow your dragon-slaying hero in the ways of the warrior, thief, or wizard, he'll do things differently. Producer Romain de Waubert de Genlis explains: "You enter an area guarded by two orcs. A warrior will tend to go head-to-head, maybe using the environment to his advantage. He might destroy a balcony to stun one, then shove the other, destroy his shield, disarm him, and finally decapitate him. That's for those who prefer to smell their opponent's breath.

"But maybe you're the sneaky sort," de Genlis continues. 'You could use a rope arrow to climb above an orc, and then fall behind him and cut his throat. If the other one doesn't catch on, you can finish him off as cleanly and covertly. Finally, folks who specialize as mages and want to wreak havoc without sweating much can shrink the first orc and step on him before freezing the other and following up with a fireball. Adapt your play style to the skills you select or adapt your skills to your play style, it's up to you." **/Shawn Elliott**

>> WARRIORS, THIEVES, AND WIZARDS DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY.

▲ *Dark Messiah*'s not all dungeons.

MAGIC



SHOW ME MAGIC Producer de Genlis talks us through *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*'s mumbo jumbo (i.e., spells).

FIREBALL

"Fireballs—classic fantasy fare—are powerful, but they're also slow to charge up and consume massive mana. Their area effect, however, hurts several foes with a single shot. On top of that, they'll set any flammable object ablaze in the bargain."

LIGHTNING BOLT

"One thing you have to keep in mind here is that all elements are linked, so firing a Lightning Bolt at wood or in water leads to myriad results. I won't give it away, but you should get the idea. On top of that, the spell has two fire modes: you can choose to chain small electric bursts or to charge up one massive, devastating bolt that bounces between walls and from foe to foe. This allows you to adjust your attack according to the opposition you face and the area you're fighting in."

TELEKINESIS

"Think *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun. Since we're working with [Valve's] Source engine, it seemed natural to include a similarly great feature in our game. However, we're stretching the concept by allowing the spell to interact not only with small objects, but with larger ones as well. You'll also be able to eliminate an enemy by throwing him away or smashing him against a wall. Telekinesis also lets you trigger switches from afar...something that'll prove crucial in certain areas, whether you wish to access new rooms or prepare traps."

ICE SPRAY

"Ice Spray is a contact spell that freezes foes statue-solid before you break them into pieces. It turns out, however, that it has unexpected side effects, the best of which is that it makes surfaces slippery. In practice, you can spray an ice patch in a narrow or dangerous area to make your foes fall flat on their faces or down to their deaths. It introduces another tactical layer to *Dark Messiah*'s combat."

FLAME ARROW

"Flame Arrows have a high rate of fire but don't do much damage. Still, the spell has an interesting feature: Once you've fired a Flame Arrow, you can then direct it to a desired target, and it works no matter how many you've already launched, so, for instance, you can fire several into the sky and then guide them all into a goblin. It's especially useful against fast enemies and for preparing hit-and-run attacks. And above all, writing your name in the sky is fun, isn't it?"

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

It's a classic case of East meeting West when magic and technology collide.

The dark, Gothic mechanics of the steampunk-like Vinci.

Rise of Legends will work with physics cards for even more detail.

PUBLISHER: **Big Huge Games** DEVELOPER: **Microsoft** GENRE: **Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2006**

DON'T CALL *RISE OF LEGENDS* AN old-school fantasy strategy game. The people at developer Big Huge Games certainly don't think of it that way. In fact, they got all up in arms when we made that mistake.

"Plenty of games out there do the 'elves-versus-orcs-versus-humans' thing," says Paul Stephanouk, the game's lead designer, "and they do a pretty damn good job. We don't want to try and make another one." And though he may be a little close to the matter, he's right: While it has some standard fantasy RTS trappings, *Rise of Legends* is anything but your average swords-and-sorcery fare.

THE NEW WORLD

Big Huge Games scored a big huge hit in 2003 with its first game, *Rise of Nations*, but rather than make a straight-up sequel to that history-based strategy game, the company decided to take a left turn into fantasy with its next title.

"We're all history geeks over here," says Stephanouk, "so why not build a game that has *Rise of Nations*–style gameplay but ultimately takes us someplace new?" That someplace new is a world that draws from some of their favorite historical reference points but then veers off into the fantastic. It's a mixture of technology and fantasy, of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Take the player race called the Vinci. Inspired by the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Big Huge Games "worked with it until it fit our goal," according to Stephanouk, "familiar, yet vividly its own entity."

"*The Arabian Nights* was another strong source of inspiration for us," says Stephanouk, "which led to the creation of the Alim." Based on the classic Middle Eastern tales, the Alim culture thrives on magic. Djinns sling spells as dragons and giant scorpions rise to fight alongside the Alim.

Stephanouk let slip details of the third playable race, an as-yet-unnamed culture inspired by the Mayans. Invaders from another planet, they have technology so far advanced that it seems like magic compared to the Vinci's. (The single-player campaign has you trying to unravel what this alien race is up to.)

All three races struggle to control one resource: timonium. No, you're not chopping wood, mining coal, or gathering any other standard resources—thank God. You're also not building urban sprawls like a fantasy-themed Los Angeles. The designers' intent is to focus the experience on battle instead of civic planning.

ROL MIXES FANTASY AND TECHNOLOGY. THE FAMILIAR AND UNFAMILIAR.

BALANCING STORY WITH GAMEPLAY

One of the defining features of *Rise of Nations* is the open-ended "conquer the world" campaign. Instead of following a linear plot, you are able to plot your moves and pick your battles on a board-game-like map. The trick for *Rise of Legends* is how to create a rich world with an in-depth narrative and combine that with open-ended gameplay. The solution? Continue to give the player real choices at the strategic level, but incorporate story-based characters in battle.

Throughout the *ROL* campaign, you encounter hero units that you can recruit into your personal entourage. You'll need to choose wisely, as each hero unit has unique skills that are upgradeable between skirmishes. Some heroes gain new abilities; others can recruit military units to follow them into battle. Using the Vinci heroes as an example, do you max out Carlini's snipe ability or boost Giacomo's ability to draft clockwork men? Either choice drastically influences how you'll conduct your campaign.

"We call our world 'fantasy' because it identifies more with the fantastic," says Stephanouk, "but our historical side demands that we adhere to certain logic and certain rules. That goes beyond just taking ideas from our world and putting them into a new one. We ended up blending fantasy and science fiction to create a world that is internally consistent and that plays by real rules." **/Darren Gladstone**

HELLGATE: LONDON

▲ Shooting arse-face in his arse-face only makes him angier.

PUBLISHER: Namco DEVELOPER: Flagship Studios GENRE: First-Person Action-RPG RELEASE DATE: 2006

"IT'S VERY MUCH, 'HEY, YOU GOT your shooter in my RPG! Hey, you got your RPG in my shooter!'" says Dave Brevik, creator of *Hellgate: London* (and formerly project lead, design lead, and lead programmer of *Diablo* and *Diablo II*). No doubt, the game reaches across the shooter-RPG chasm—and into totally new fantasy-game territory—in more ways than one, though the most obvious is the inclusion of first-person gameplay. Although melee combat always takes place in the third person ("There are lots of visual moves and melee skills associated with animations, and you'd lose all of that by being in first person," explains Brevik), both first- and third-person play are at your disposal through the rest of the game.

"I love shooters, but I hated the lack of depth. I hated that I was limited to six guns, and that I went through a maze and at the end I fought a big boss and I won," Brevik says. "I never felt like I was changing my character or there was any story involved. So I said, what if we have a first-person game where we randomize the levels like we did in *Diablo*, and there are not six guns—there are 100 guns? That's the game I wanted to play: a first-person shooter with an RPG on the back end." Which pretty much describes *Hellgate* to a T. "It's action oriented; you're shooting all sorts of monsters and there are lots of things happening. But at the same time, it's very much an RPG: You're doing quests and there's a story and you're building up your character and modifying stats—things that aren't in most shooters."

Another happy marriage of shooter and RPG conventions: Weapons and spells are related. "A lot of the spellcasting is the guns," Brevik says. "You're shooting your fireball through your firebolter gun, and then a character's skills complement them and add damage in different situations." That same sort of this-and-that fusion is also reflected in the game's cyberpunk setting. Why the departure from the time and place of the dragon and orc? "Originally," says Brevik, "when we said we'd incorporate the shooter aspect, we said we'd have to make it futuristic because, frankly, it's not as fun shooting crossbows as it is shooting machine guns." Agreed.

/Kristen Salvatore

>> "A SHOOTER WITH AN RPG ON THE BACK END" DESCRIBES *HELLLGATE* TO A T.

SAVAGE 2: A TORTURED SOUL

▲ *Savage*'s melee system gets a major overhaul in the sequel.

PUBLISHER: TBA DEVELOPER: S2 Games GENRE: RTS Shooter RELEASE DATE: Late 2006

YOU RARELY SEE A GAME THAT LETS strategy-lovin' control freaks play side by side with adrenaline-crazed shooter fans. Nevertheless, that's exactly what happened in 2003 when S2 Games' ambitious, genre-bending *Savage: The Battle for Newerth* hit the scene. A multiplayer game in which two teams square off, *Savage* was genuinely innovative. One commander on each side plays from a God's-eye view—as in an RTS—harvesting resources, developing new technologies and weapons, and ordering troops, while all the other players on the ground execute the commander's orders from first- and third-person perspectives. Flawed but fundamentally cool, *Savage* begged for a sequel. Now, finally, S2 is back with *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*.

Chalk up *Savage 2*'s big changes to user feedback. At the top of the list is a single-player training area; as the original multiplayer-only game threw new players into the deep end from the get-go. Also to be improved are squad organization (which was something of a mess last time) and communication between officers and battle groups.

The rest of the changes, aside from the pupil-searing graphics you're seeing in the screenshots on this page, revolve around incorporating RPG elements and balancing the gameplay. So far, S2 plans to include 20 unique character classes for players to choose from. Some are better suited to slower-paced RPG play, such as dwarf engineers who excel at building and blowing things up, and hand-to-hand fighters who should benefit from what the developers promise is an improved melee combat system. FPS fans, on the other hand, can pick classes that will provide a faster-paced, *Counter-Strike*-like experience. S2 has a lot of work ahead, but gamers bemoaning the lack of original titles these days should be rooting for this small, indie developer, as *Savage 2* shows lots of promise. **/Darren Gladstone**

▲ If this looks good at 3 a.m., stop drinking.

▲ *Extreme Makeover: Gnome Edition.*

OLD SCHOOL >>>

Not every game needs to reinvent the wheel—check Blizzard's Battle.net server if you need solid proof. Five years after its release, *Diablo II* still stands as a testament to the validity of an entire genre. Hack-n-slash action-RPGs will always be fun, and games like *Mage Knight: Apocalypse* dutifully carry on the grand tradition. Meanwhile, the fifth installment in the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series gives armchair strategists more of what they crave. Why fix what ain't broke?

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2006**

WELL, LOOK WHO'S BACK FROM THE dead! One of the best and most-beloved fantasy strategy series ever looked like it was gone for good after 3DO bit the dust and dragged developers New World Computing and the *Might and Magic* franchise down with it a few years back.

But against all odds, there will now be a *Heroes of Might and Magic V*, thanks to Ubisoft and Russian developers Nival Interactive, makers of the outstanding *Silent Storm* series. The new team is eager to bring the series into the 21st century but also mindful of the series' hardcore fan base, who would burn the developers alive if they messed too much with the core gameplay.

"While we had lots of ideas for revolutionizing the game," says Ubisoft producer Fabrice Cambounet, "we felt an obligation to fans of this mythical series to keep some basic elements of the original games." In terms of revolution, the developers are adding a 3D engine and a dynamic battle system, in which the action goes on slowly in real time, with the "frequency of actions dependent on creatures' initiatives and your hero skills," according to Cambounet. But fear not: Old-school fans can still play the entire game in turn-based mode. Even bigger changes are planned for multiplayer. Not only will there be a simultaneous turn mode, in which players resolve turns at once, but there will also be a "ghost" mode, in which you can perform actions during your opponent's turn, using ghost units that can move around, spy, and hinder enemy heroes. Finally, a hero-versus-hero mode will let players battle it out in quick brawls, similar to a fighting game.

"It's natural that some fans are worried," says Cambounet, "especially regarding the innovations we're adding. We just tell them to wait and see. We haven't revealed everything yet." **/ Jeff Green**

▲ *Heroes V*'s new 3D engine lets you zoom in on battles. Is this a good idea? We don't know.

▲ Let's see: Here are a treasure chest, a tower, and a monster. But where's Waldo?

▲ Our money's on the big, flaming robo-mech.

MAGE KNIGHT APOCALYPSE

PUBLISHER: Namco DEVELOPER: InterServ International GENRE: Action-RPG RELEASE DATE: Spring 2006

WITH THE RUNAWAY SUCCESS OF *World of WarCraft*, it seems that Blizzard isn't in any hurry to get the long-rumored *Diablo III* out the door. Fortunately for action-RPG junkies, Namco's *Mage Knight: Apocalypse* keeps the hack-n-slash fires burning. And while *Mage Knight* shares the name of its turn-based tabletop miniatures counterpart, it also overflows with *Diablo*-style action, making it anything but boring.

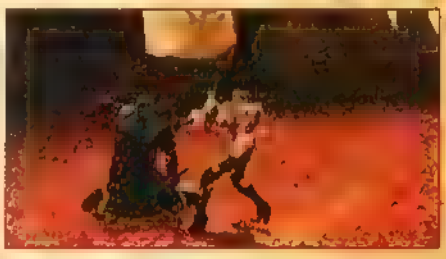
Mage Knight's universe blends exotic magic with steampunk technology, which is immediately apparent as you select from among five unique characters. You've got your typical pointy-eared elven healer, tough Amazon warrior chick, and bikini-clad undead supermodel, as well as a trigger-happy pyromaniac dwarf with a knack for firearms and incendiary devices, and finally the draconum—a reptilian shaman who fuses elemental magic with a handful of transformation talents.

Each character possesses several different areas of expertise, such as the undead nightblade's affinity for necromancy, vampirism, and melee combat. Different skill trees open up depending on which talents you designate as major and minor areas of interest; you might play your nightblade as a stealthy life-drinking stalker or a sword-wielding combat whiz. Your character's appearance gradually evolves depending on your play style, too; by the end of the 25-plus-hour single-player story mode, no two dwarves should look alike.

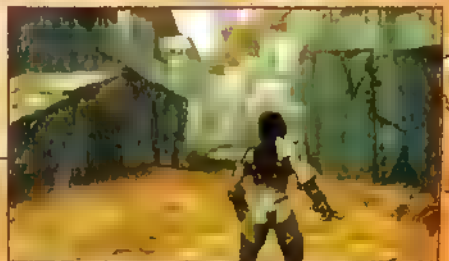
And when you're ready to take said dwarves into multiplayer, you gain the added advantage of powerful combination attacks that utilize each party member's diverse abilities. A slew of general combos gets things started, and each mixture of two or more characters provides plenty of specialized maneuvers, such as the cannonball attack—or, as we like to call it, "dwarf tossing." The co-op mode supports at least five players...and while nothing's set in stone yet, developer InterServ International has also hinted at the notion of competitive play. As far as we're concerned, *Diablo III* can take its sweet time. / **Ryan Scott**

▲ Is it just us, or do these guys look a little... uh, distracted?

SPECIALIZED MANEUVERS INCLUDE THE CANNONBALL ATTACK—OR, AS WE LIKE TO CALL IT—"DWARF TOSSING."



▲ Exactly what kind of protection is a chain-mail bikini supposed to provide, anyway?



▲ Lonely curves in a large Cubist world.

COLUMN

GLADSTONED

Senior editor Darren Gladstone's monthly rant

Gizmology means better living through technology. It's not in any dictionary, but I live by that code. Some gadgets are useful, som e not so much. Here are a few of my current favorites:

ERGODEX DX1 INPUT SYSTEM

$150, www.ergodex.com

How about instead of trying to replace my keyboard, I just replace the keys? The DX1 is a very hardcore solution for gamers who really want to personalize their experience. First, place the 25 keys (extra programmable keys are sold separately) anywhere that makes sense to you on the 11-by-9-inch pad. Using the software, set up the commands for each button and make your own ultimate *Battlefield 2* command console—or whatever else you want

QBOX GIFT BOX

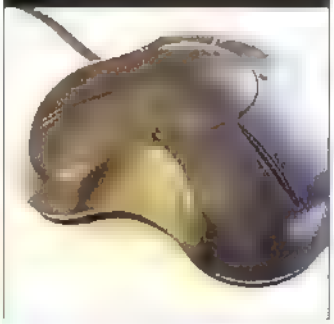
$60, www.qboxusa.com

That special someone is out there. You know, that orc you've been spelunking the Walling Caverns with since level 10. Oh, those happy, romantic days! Stop trying to figure out how to pop the question, because here's your answer. Place "The One Ring to Wed Them All" in this USB-powered box and snail mail it to your gal. You unlock the box remotely via the Internet with a code: /kneel. /1. Will you marry me? /kiss. (At press time, the URL wasn't ready—but we're told it will be.)

STEALTHSWITCH

$30, www.stealthswitch.com

It's my job to be able to play *Battlefield 2* or *World of WarCraft* whenever I have the itch. You're not so lucky. This beauty will keep you in the game and out of trouble with the boss. Here's how: Plug it into the back of your PC and set the foot pedal down out of sight. Get back to gaming. Then, when some jerk comes calling about a TPS report, jam on the pedal. The software in the background will minimize whatever program you command, mute the sound, and pop up some lame Excel spreadsheet. You're welcome.



ION TECHNOLOGIES 4-PORT USB ILLUMINATED MOUSE PAD

$25, www.ionproducts.net

Cave-dwelling hermit gamers like me hate two things: excessive light and having to get up off our lazy asses to plug in more gear. This illuminated mouse pad also hides a handy surprise: four USB 2.0 ports on the back.

STINGRAY FIREWALL

$130, www.stingrayinc.com

As h4rdc0r3 as I may think I am, there's always somebody with greater tech kung fu. That's just how it goes. So when you're traveling to some of the seedier sides of the Net, plug in this portable hardware firewall. It dynamically masks your IP and inspects all packets. In all my tests, there was no noticeable game lag because of the extra security. If I'm wrong and this does nothing, well, at least there's a bunch of blinking lights on the device. That'll make you feel a little safer

DAS KEYBOARD

$80, www.daskeyboard.com

Only the hardest of the hardcore need apply for a keyboard without any letters on it. The "A" key is still the "A" key, but not one of the buttons is labeled. At least the tactile response for each key feels awesome on this costly keyboard. My advice: Avoid the guy using this at your next LAN party.

SLING MEDIA SLINGBOX

$250, www.slingmedia.com

The Slingbox is important for road-ready couch potatoes. Plug the box into your TV (or TiVo, or DVD player, or whatever), download an applet onto any computer with broadband access, and BAM! You're remotely controlling and viewing stuff when you're out of town or just craving a quick TV break while at work. Sweet! Never a moment without *South Park* again!

Got a bone to pick with Gladstone? E-mail him at darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com

AGE
EMPIRES
III

III
Ultimate goal
Shape the face of the new world.

AGE OF EMPIRES III

Immediate goal

Make it through the next ten minutes.

Deploy armies. Command armadas. Inspire a nation. With your brilliant strategic planning and shrewd combat tactics, a new world full of promise is yours for the taking. A new empire is yours to build. But will you survive long enough to enjoy it?

TEEN
T
Blood
Violence
ESRB
ENSEMBLE STUDIOS
Microsoft
game studios
ageofempires3.com

100 BUCKS

IT'S BURNING A HOLE IN YOUR POCKET. GO SPEND IT

PULP
Justice
$3 DCCOMICS.COM

With all the comic-based games coming out, we had to double-dip into the pulp fiction this month. In *Justice*, a group of superheroes is about to learn that they aren't the only ones who can band together. Some of the greatest criminal masterminds are uniting into a sort of supervillain co-op. Think back to those old *Super Friends* cartoons—minus the dopey Wonder Twins. The Legion of Doom is back! The story is a long one, stretching out over 12 bimonthly issues.

PULP
Desolation Jones
$3 DCCOMICS.COM

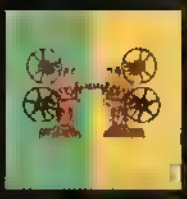
Writer Warren Ellis is one sick puppy. Follow along with Mr. Jones, a man in search of "the foulest artifact created by man," as he beats his way through the seediest parts of L.A.'s underworld of retired spies. To wit: "You don't win fights by being a strong man or a clever boxer. You win fights by being more prepared to permanently f*** up the other guy." Not for the kiddies, but the mature crowd should check this out.

MUSIC
Death Cab for Cutie: Plans
$13 AMAZON.COM

If you like listening to the Postal Service (the band... or your local letter carriers), then have we got the band for you. The album, slickly produced and ready for mass-market consumption, is certain to get a couple songs (like "Soul Meets Body") stuck in your head. And if you want more of a fix, Aspyr somehow talked these guys into doing a new track for the *Stubbs the Zombie* game.

BOOK
The March
$18 AMAZON.COM

What would you do if you lived in a small town and heard that 60,000 men were down the road and about to burn down your house? Answer: Pack quickly and run like hell. That is exactly what happened as General William Tecumseh Sherman ("Uncle Billy" to his troops) led his march on the South during the Civil War. Hardcore strategy gamers that live and breathe hex-based gaming will appreciate E.L. Doctorow's (*Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate*) amazing look at the lives affected by that destructive tear through the South.



MUSIC
The New Pornographers: Twin Cinema
$12 AMAZON.COM

Mom, Dad, before you start writing in to complain: This is a band. They are neither new nor pornographers. We know—we're a little disappointed as well. However, this tightly crafted disc won't let you down if you're looking for a mellow mix. The Vancouver indie band's third major release contains 14 rock tracks that may not fully rock the house, but it feels like a good balance of the Shins and the Kinks. Try out the title track and "The Bones of an Idol."

DVD
American Gothic: The Complete Series
$35 AMAZON.COM

"Someone's at the door!" This DVD set is long overdue. Those who missed the series during its short CBS run years ago owe it to themselves to pick this up. Director Sam Raimi created one of the darkest and creepiest TV series ever, starring Gary Cole (*Office Space*'s Lumbergh) as Lucas Buck, creepy kin of the devil. Buck, the sheriff of a sleepy South Carolina town, messed with people's minds and tortured souls on a weekly basis. Kind of like our very own Robert Coffey.

MUSIC
The Warlocks: Surgery
$12 AMAZON.COM

This disc will rip through your brain like a chain saw. Shying away from the fuzzy noise of their last few discs, the Warlocks performed a little surgery of their own, and the resulting music found here sounds great. It's not quite Sonic Youth or the Walkmen, but check out "Like Surgery" and "Suicide Note."

BUDS
Pabst Blue Ribbon
$4 FOR TWO BEERS

The gang here at *CGW* has been killing themselves to bring you the best damn gaming magazine, and frankly, we need to take a break sometimes. That's when we amble down to our local watering hole and hoist one or two in between writing articles. Or sometimes while writing articles. Of course, we'd never encourage you to try doing the same. Drinking is bad for you. It makes you neither funny nor attractive to the opposite sex.

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

NOVEMBER 2005	PUBLISHER
Agatha Christie: And Then There Were None	DreamCatcher
American Conquest: Divided Nation	Digital Jesters
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	Electronic Arts
The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	Buena Vista
Diplomacy	Paradox
Dynasty Warriors 4	Koei
Fear Factor: Unleashed	Hip Games/Arush
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Gun	Activision
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Electronic Arts
Peter Jackson's King Kong	Ubisoft
L.A. Rush	Midway
The Matrix: Path of Neo	Atari
[redacted]	Electronic Arts
Pac-Man World 3	Namco
Payout Poker and Casino	Namco
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
[redacted]	[redacted]
Tycoon City: New York	[redacted]
The Movies	Activision
DECEMBER 2005	
Just Cause	Eidos
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II	Electronic Arts
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	Ubisoft
[redacted]	
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
The Lord of the Rings Online	Turbine
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
Scarface: The World Is Yours	VU Games
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
X3: Reunion	Enlight
[redacted]	
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos
Company of Heroes	THQ
Curious George	Namco
The Godfather	Electronic Arts
Hellgate: London	Namco
Heroes of Might and Magic V	Ubisoft
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
Star Wars: Empire at War	LucasArts
Stargate SG-1: The Alliance	Namco
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Valve
Tomb Raider: Legend	Eidos

POCKET CHANGE: $0.0

ONLINE EVOLUTION

Massively multiplayer games continue to grow, but where are they going?

ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS nothing, just geeks with 20-sided dice. Then, in the late 1970s, text-based multiuser dungeons sprouted up on university servers. Productivity halted and mainframes crashed from overuse—even then, apparently, gamers had way too much time on their hands. Later, games such as LucasArts' *Habitat* in 1987 and 3DO's *Meridian 59* in 1996 made the move to graphically represented communities (with a limit of 35 simultaneous players for the latter), while *Ultima Online* scored the first big commercial hit and ushered in the monthly subscription model commonly used today.

As far as the genre has come, though, MMO gaming has still only barely grown out of its infancy. Blizzard crows that 4 million users globally are hooked to *World of WarCraft*—but that leaves 6-billion-plus people on Earth yet to be reached. Are MMOs doomed to continue fishing from the same pond of players over and over? Major publishers are asking themselves that very question right now. So are we.

Developers must do six very real things to make MMO games reach out to even more people: rethink monthly fees, manage in-game economies in new ways, explore new worlds and themes, use new technology to change the way people access games, weigh the balance between structured storytelling and open worlds, and foster a better sense of community among players.

Over the course of six issues of *CGW*, we'll examine these factors one by one, including insights from key players in the industry and a little punditry of our own, as we scrutinize the evolution of the MMO market.

Ultima Online is commonly credited as the first commercial MMO whose model is still copied.

THE FOOD CHAIN

Twelve bucks an hour. That's what people were willing to pay—in 1984 currency, no less—to play the first commercial MMO. CompuServe hosted the text-based *Island of Kesmai* while gamers handed over small fortunes to play over their 1200-baud modems. It was a one-of-a-kind experience for the time, and laughable by today's standards...and yet, it's still no small pinch to fork over $15 a month to delve once more into *World of WarCraft*'s Molten Core.

Do monthly fees still work? Yes and no. An MMO can hook 1 million people, but there are easily 30 other titles at the same time also clamoring for gamers' greenbacks. "Realistically," says Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter, "I see 10 million people out there willing to pay these $15 monthly fees."

As these games become more successful, more imitators appear. Suddenly, a number of similar games are all asking for your money. "A finite number of people have 15 bucks a month to spend on games," says Pachter. "And of them," he continues, "there's a finite subset who have the time or desire to play that much." Using his logic, those same 10 million people would need to subscribe to multiple games, paying monthly fees for each one, for there to be more than one or two success stories. But the joy of these games lies in the immersion—and there isn't enough time in the day if you start signing up for multiple MMOs. In reality, people jump off one MMO in favor of the newest release. That means the half-life of an MMO game, according to Pachter, is about a year—even with fresh content.

Tom Nichols, vice president of marketing for Turbine, Inc., disagrees. Still bullish on monthly fees, Nichols believes successful MMOs help the category grow. "The number of new players entering the category far exceeds the number of players who switch from game to game, an indication that we're still very much in a growth period," he says.

Nichols adds, "There will always be competition to attract those new players, but developing

titles that are faithful to such beloved and high-profile franchises as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Lord of the Rings* will help—and has helped—us bring those new fans into the MMO space."

A NEW PAYDAY

Sony Online Entertainment has thrived with the monthly fee model since 1999, but even it realizes that some change is inevitable. The company has been beefing up its cable-subscription-like package, Station Access, and by acquiring new titles such as *The Matrix Online* and *Toontown Online*, SOE is working to tempt you to plunk down $22 a month for an all-access pass.

Citing cable ("You pay for extended basic cable programming, but you only really watch five channels"), Pachter loves the idea of these bundled packages offering multiple games, but he thinks prices need to drop: "Let's say you add a $3 to $5 surcharge a month on top of your broadband bill and let them choose from a number of games; you could conceivably see as many as 100 million people that would sign up—but we're talking years from now [when broadband becomes even more widespread and cheaper]."

In the meantime, Sony Online, is trying something slightly more radical. "We believe very strongly that the future of MMO gaming is not just subscription based. In fact," says SOE president John Smedley, "we're going to put our money where our mouth is when we release our next big game in the fall of 2006." The idea behind the new mystery title is this: The game is free—no level restrictions, no retail release, no BS. Download it and you're good to go. "However," says Smedley, "there will be a velvet rope area. We're toying with the idea of charging $4.99 a month for a few extra bank slots or places to hold things." Lusting after that flashy new designer armor? SOE will provide the ability to purchase "cosmetic items," and Station Exchange (SOE's version of an MMO eBay) will be available on all game servers. Of course, those signing up for Station Access get behind that "velvet rope" as well.

As an example, Smedley kept pointing to a game that you've probably never heard of: *RuneScape*. It's one of the fastest-growing MMOs. It's primitive looking, but you can play the game right now without so much as a credit card number. Of course, the catch is that there are extras to buy—$5 a month gets you all sorts of bonuses, like extra missions, more monsters, even bonus minigames. Smedley's kid can't stop playing it.

Paying a little bit here and a little bit there is where a lot of companies are going. "Microtransactions" is the buzzword. What it means: Your first taste is free. You want more? You've gotta pay for it. The trick is getting people through the door in the first place. It's a concept that isn't new in the Far East.

THE WILD EAST

Nexon's *Kart Rider* is huge in Korea—as in, bigger-than-*WOW* huge. As of May, more than 12 million registered racers had revved their engines and registered to play the online title. At its core, you're looking at a Web version of *Mario Kart*. The difference is that it's free to play. Nexon makes its money by selling power-ups. >

▲ SOE's subscription plan offers access to multiple games for one monthly fee.

THE IDEA BEHIND SONY ONLINE'S UPCOMING GAME IS THAT IT'S FREE—NO LEVEL RESTRICTIONS, NO RETAIL RELEASE, NO BS.

▲ *Kart Rider*, the Korean casual MMO game, has hooked over 12 million players.

Some Korean publishers are westward bound. Webzen, for example, exploded at E3 with *Huxley* and *Sun*. *MU* alone already claims 56 million registered users in Asia. While unable to talk strategy for the American market yet, Jason Wonacott, director of corporate communications for Webzen America, did say this upon returning from a trip to South Korea: "People in Korea are rabid about games. They have adopted online gaming as a part of their culture, so that makes it easier to get them interested." Webzen is doing this by hooking players early in the process. Right now, open betas allow Korean gamers into *Sun*, but when the game goes live, Webzen won't wipe the servers and make people start from scratch. Players will just start paying the subscription fee. "It's working really well for us," says Wonacott.

And don't forget a little company called NCsoft. This Korean trailblazer has been taking some chances of its own. About two years ago, it came onto the scene Stateside with an impressive array of unique MMO titles. While sticking with monthly fees on some titles, Robert Garriott, CEO of NCsoft North America, told us about some interesting plans going forward. "Not every game will work with one pricing model, at least not the way games are made right now," he says. The games dictate the costs, and with the company's superpowered titles, one price buys entry. If you have *City of Heroes* and pick up the retail box of *City of Villains*, you need to pay only one monthly fee.

Heroes and villains collide for the same price. ▼

▲ Now you won't be able to get that damn "Wanta Fanta?" song out of your head. Sorry about that.

> "NOT EVERY GAME WILL WORK WITH ONE PRICING MODEL, AT LEAST NOT [THE GAMES] MADE RIGHT NOW." –ROBERT GARRIOTT, CEO OF NCSOFT NA

"We can't go into too many details yet," says Garriott, "but you can expect to see a lot happening at our website (plaync.com)." NCsoft is toying with the idea of a subscription model that allows access to not only your MMO games, but also to casual games, all gathered centrally under one account.

How about NCsoft's no-strings-attached approach to *Guild Wars*? One million users can't be wrong. *Guild Wars* has the trappings of an MMO, but it really isn't one. It's more of a modern *Diablo II* where you can walk through the in-game chat rooms. You pay a flat fee to purchase the game and that's it. The client caches update data in the background while you're playing, and you interact only with other people in hub areas. Play as much as you want. The only time you'll need to pay anything is if you want to grab a stand-alone expansion.

You're probably wondering how NCsoft can finance servers for *Guild Wars* if the game is free. Hey, if Blizzard could host all those *Diablo* dungeon crawls over Battle.net, why can't *GW*'s developer? After all, ArenaNet consists of the architects who helped build Battle.net in the first place. Garriott explains: "A majority of the game is happening on your hard drive in an instanced area. The amount of shared data between a few people in-mission is nothing. That requires relatively little bandwidth and overhead compared to a proper MMO."

Of course, you can always just make the whole online experience free. Well, kind of free. Like *Kart Rider*, MindArk's *Project Entropia* technically falls outside the realm of a conventional MMO, but you can download it and jump right in. To make any money in this virtual world, you can either do some "sweat farming"—menial tasks like gathering dung (no joke), running errands, and helping others hunt—or just pony up a credit card number. One dollar is equal to 10 *Project Entropia* dollars (although the way the U.S. economy is going these days, you never know...). Those are the only viable ways to get ahead and buy virtual merchandise in *Entropia*. Then there's a breakout success like the MMO *Yulgang*. Using *Entropia*'s model, it came out of nowhere, and two months after its release, *Yulgang* claims 9 million users in China alone.

Just before *WOW* launched, Funcom tried an interesting little experiment: It made *Anarchy Online* free. At first, you could download and play *AO* for a trial period. Soon after, the basic game was made totally free. It worked. According to Jorgen Tharaldsen, Funcom's product director, "With the original *AO*, to be blunt, we released ▶

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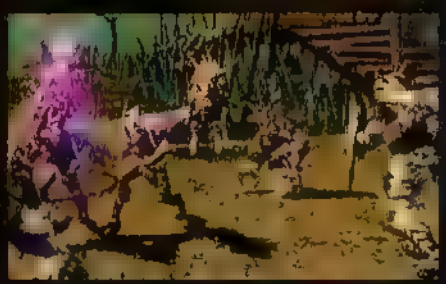
an inferior product, and going down the digital download route gave us a unique second chance to show everybody just how much our game had improved." In that time, over a half-million people registered to play *Anarchy Online*. "Not bad for a four-year-old game," Tharaldsen jokes. How does Funcom manage to keep afloat, then? You need to pay a monthly fee to access the expansion packs. The other big incentive to pay: Doing so disables all the in-game advertisements that appear on virtual billboards (someone really needs to execute the "Wanta Fanta" girls). Encouraged by the results thus far, Funcom has already extended the free-game offer into 2007. Tharaldsen is optimistic about more people paying for the full experience after getting a taste.

MMO games *can* achieve more penetration here in the States. "The other problem right now [for MMO gaming in the U.S.]," according to Garriott, "is all the other costs beyond the game." He cites that right now in Asia, entire countries are wired for broadband—and it's affordable. "You can get broadband for about $15 a month in Japan or South Korea," he says. Here, you're lucky if your $10 gets you a lousy dial-up connection. / **Darren Gladstone**

▲ Webzen's *Huxley* is one MMO game that's aiming high.



▲ *Guild Wars* helped break some ground by following the online model of *Diablo*.

CGW SAYS...

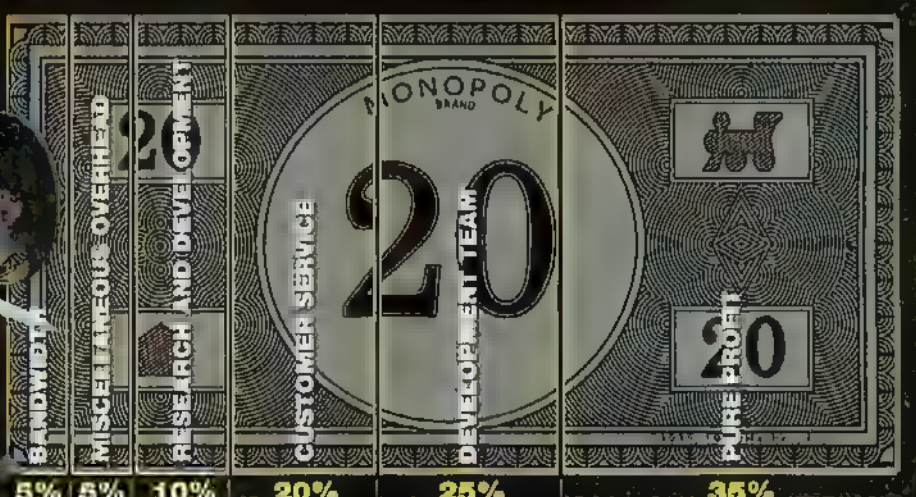
PEOPLE LIKE CHOICES. You like [illegible] and $10,000 virtual items. You'd [illegible] another $20 a month in [illegible] and get [illegible]. Now [illegible] your hand if you bought a ring tone.

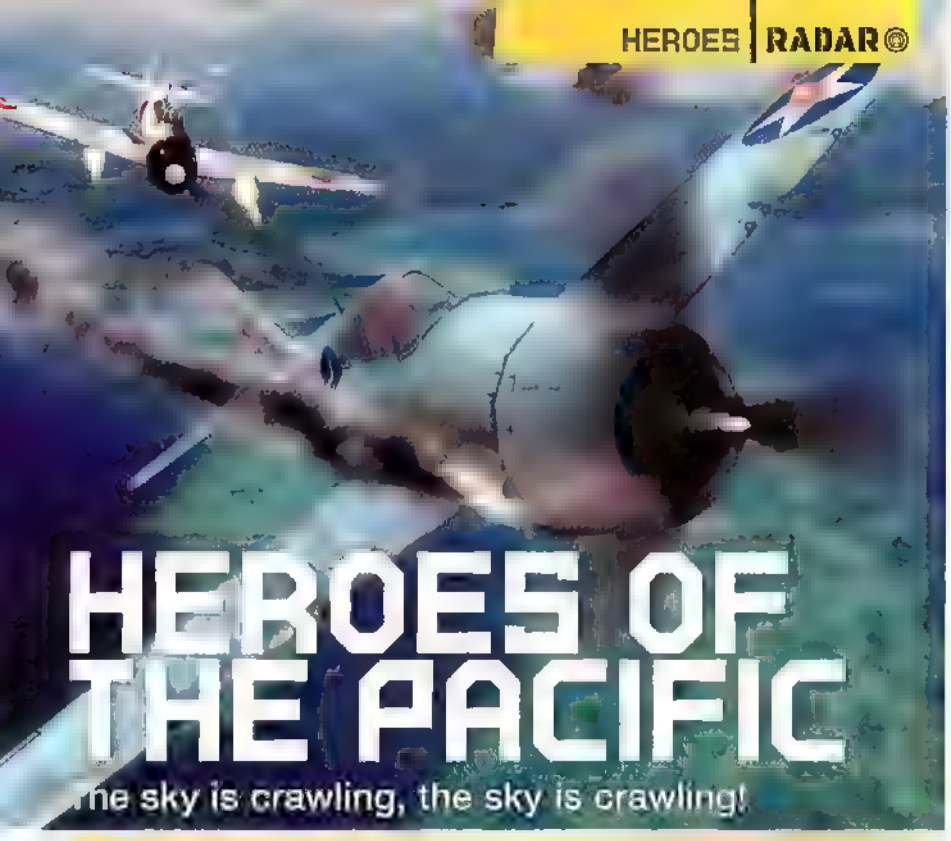
You went to see more people playing MMOs instead of paying more to play. Or [illegible] the price of admission to play. Make the money back in other ways [illegible] context-relevant ads in the game if you must (don't break *World of Warcraft*'s illusion with a pop-up or a DVD player), but at least offer tangible bonuses for paying a low monthly rate. Or create a gaming bundle that works [illegible] without the need to buy boxed copies for a variety of games. What about a truly episodic game that releases new installments every week and charges you dollars to play each time? Between updates, you can venture through the virtual world and explore. Or how about a reward system, say in PvP mode, where the most successful gamers play for free?

Look to companies in wired nations like South Korea that are [illegible] right now and growing exponentially because of it. From what we're hearing, SOE and NCsoft are on the right track and with new payment plan options [illegible] harvesting by the fall end of 2006. As the costs to play go down (and, hopefully, the cost of broadband get down to manageable levels), you're going to see the number of MMO gamers dramatically rise in the next years down the road, we think. As many single-player games will have an MMO element, we're excited about Funcom's innovative Age of Conan hybrid adventure, which is attempting just that [illegible]—kind of like you'll be experiencing [illegible] world [illegible] in this [illegible] mode.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?

You're paying monthly fees for the right to play with 33-year-old men posing as women. After speaking with key players from different mmo publishers, here is an extremely rough estimate of where your money is going....





HEROES OF THE PACIFIC

The sky is crawling, the sky is crawling!

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **IR Gurus** RELEASE DATE: **October 2005**

PREVIEW

DO NOT ADJUST YOUR AILERON trim in *Heroes of the Pacific*, Ubisoft's dubya-dubya-two air-combat shooter landing this October. Because you can't. Unlike yonder true-to-the-wild-blue flyers like *Lock On* and *Pacific Fighters*, *Heroes* wings it in the realism department, sticking to the idea of stimulating flight over flight simulation. "Working virtual cockpits are great for sim games," says producer Justin Halliday, "but in *Heroes*, they would slow down the pace."

Really more of a dogfighter for the PlayStation generation (the game, in fact, is hitting PlayStation 2 and Xbox a month before its PC release), *Heroes* catapults players into massive air battles that promise to quadruple the intensity of the 20- to 30-craft skirmishes found in most PC flyers. "There's nothing quite like the sight of a formation of 100 enemy planes on the horizon," says Halliday, "all determined to kill you and your fellow pilots."

The point of these crowded skies, surprisingly enough, is realism. *Heroes* follows one pilot through the 10 most intense air campaigns in the Pacific, starting with Pearl Harbor and moving on to Wake Island, Midway, Iwo Jima, and more. "The war in the Pacific was fundamentally an air war," says Halliday. "[All of our aircraft] are not just there for the sake of it. We set this goal so that we could represent the huge air battles of the war. [Historical] engagements like the Marianas Turkey Shoot—where there were hundreds of planes on either side—would not have been possible without our underlying game technology."

You'll fly more than 35 planes, each of which you can upgrade with points earned by completing secondary objectives or beating missions at trickier difficulties. Every plane's handling is based roughly on its real-world counterpart, and you can opt for more realistic sim-style controls. Just don't get so caught up tweaking your stick-and-rudder settings that you miss the spectacle outside the cockpit. "There are huge moments in the missions," Halliday says, "like the B-25 bombing run on a Japanese base at Iwo Jima that reaches new levels of destruction." **Crispin Boyer**

▲ Actual acts of bona fide WWII heroism serve as the basis for five of *Heroes*' missions.

▲ Leave the flying to them: Your four wingmates respond to simple orders, or you can switch to their planes and take over.

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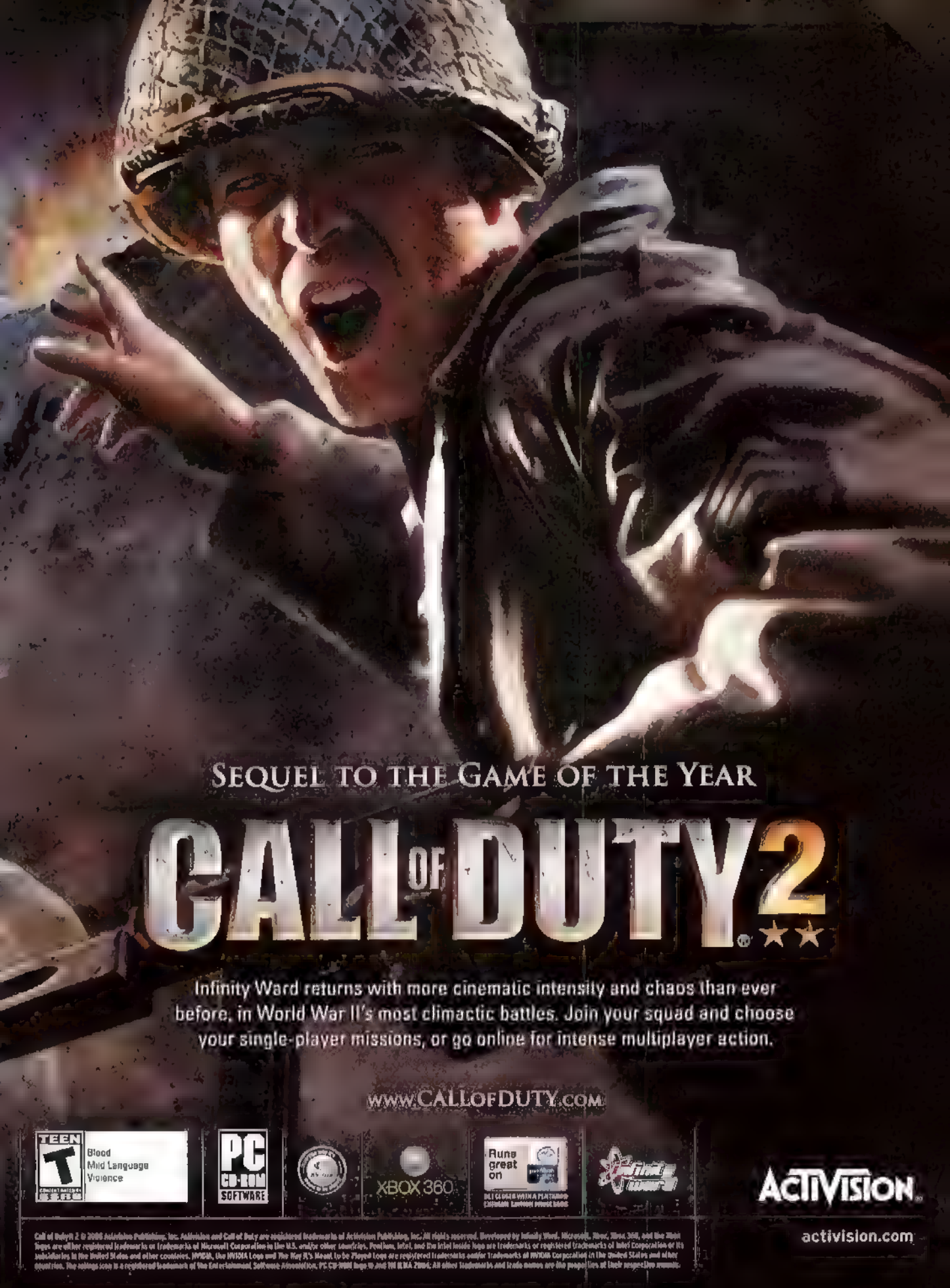
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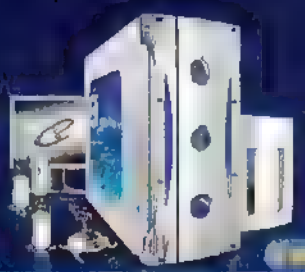

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DEVELOPER: Blizzard Entertainment
GENRE: MMORPG
RELEASE DATE: Sometime in 2006

WORLD OF THE BURNING

EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK AT THE WOW EXPANSION

OK, SO YOU'RE LEVEL 60 NOW. YOU'VE been level 60 for a while, in fact. You've created a few alts, messed around with PVP, maxed out your fishing, and maybe even sworn off the game (a few times). But if you're like most *World of WarCraft* junkies—and there are millions now—you still think about it. You still want more. And nobody knows this better, or wants to help you more, than Blizzard.

And indeed, friends, help is on the way. On October 28 at BlizzCon, its first-ever fan convention, Blizzard is formally announcing *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade*, the first official expansion to its insanely addictive massively multiplayer game. So get your junk food ready and kiss your loved ones goodbye...again. Because after visiting Blizzard in mid-September and sneaking a peek at everything the game designers have in store for the show, we're here to tell you: You are going to be very busy.

If the original *World of WarCraft* successfully transferred Blizzard's strategy-game fantasy world to an MMO setting, it is with *The Burning Crusade* that Blizzard is finally picking up the huge plot threads left dangling since *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*, revealing the fates of, and letting players get up close with, many of the franchise's biggest heroes and villains.

For players, this translates into a massive amount of new content in both the original game world of Azeroth and a brand-new one, Outland, formerly the orc planet of Draenor, now the burned-out, torn-apart, multizoned refuge of the game's über bad guy, Illidan—the ugly mook you're looking at on this page.

WARCRAFT CRUSADE

To Outland and beyond!

BY JEFF GREEN

Illidan's been wreaking havoc in Azeroth for over 10,000 years, and it is your ultimate job in *The Burning Crusade* to travel to Outland and bring him to justice.

But that's just the beginning. Blizzard is also adding two new playable races, one new profession, a slew of new high-level dungeons and raid zones, a new level cap of 70, and much, much more. We've got details on all of this in the pages ahead, so go ahead, dive in and see how the next few hundred hours of your life are going to be spent. ›

OUTLAND...

...is all that is left of the planet formerly known as Draenor, the homeworld of the orcs. We last visited Draenor in *WarCraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal*—its map is shown here. Outland won't look exactly like this, but you'll visit many of the same locales.

▼ Be careful: That hot female blood elf with the nice abs might be Jeff Green.

MEET THE BLOOD ELVES

BLIZZARD IS INTRODUCING TWO NEW player races in *The Burning Crusade*, one each for the Alliance and Horde. Despite all our whining and begging, Blizzard would only tell us about the one being announced at BlizzCon, the blood elves for the Horde. (Rumor has it that the originally planned Alliance race had to be changed, which is why Blizzard isn't revealing it yet.) Astute players may have seen this one coming for a while. Blizzard planted a few NPC blood elves around Azeroth already—one each in the Stonetalon Mountains and Ratchet, among other places—and their story even occupies a few paragraphs in the original *WOW* manual.

So who are the blood elves, and why would you want to be one? In the voluminous *WarCraft* lore, blood elves are the troubled remaining descendents of the magic-obsessed highborne elves, who were banished from their original home in Kalimdor because of that magic obsession by the uptight night elves some 9,000 years before the events of the original *WarCraft*. The highborne elves founded a new kingdom, called Quel'Thalas, in the northernmost part of Lordaeron—the currently unmarked area in *WOW* located north of the Eastern Plaguelands.

The high elves remained in Quel'Thalas, still obsessed with magic but friendly with the Alliance, all the way through to the events of *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*, when nearly the entire land and roughly 90 percent of the population were decimated by the rampaging, loony Arthas, former good guy, and the undead Scourge. Also destroyed was the Sunwell, the source of all their magical energy—and that's when things get really ugly. (And feel free to consult the games, manuals, novels, and Wikipedia for more, kids, because we're just skimming the surface here.)

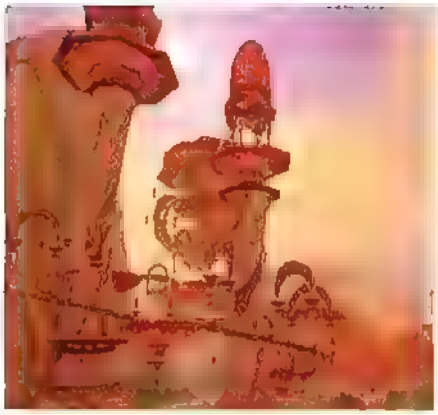
"This is Legolas as if he went down a pretty heavy path," says VP of creative development and arcane-lore meister Chris Metzen. "This is not an evil race, but a people that have been through a massive cultural trauma. They've had their asses soundly kicked by Arthas, most of their land has been razed, and now, without the Sunwell to provide them with magical energy, they're like crack addicts—they can barely get up in the morning."

WOW EXPANSION

IN 30 SECONDS

- Two new player races: blood elves for the Horde, and an as-yet-unnamed race for the Alliance
- Level cap raised to 70
- New profession: jewelcrafting
- New world: Outland
- Eight new high-level dungeons
- Special level 70–only flying mount

▲ Late at night, the blood elves lay in bed and dream about their former glory as highborne elves. Or maybe they just stay up late and play *WOW*.



The magic-addicted blood elves begin with a special Mana Tap racial ability.

RANDOM WOW FACT #5

The two rarest herbs in WoW are the black lotus (only 1–2 spawn in a zone at a time, with a respawn rate of one hour), and the blood vine (a random drop when picking herbs in Zul'Gurub if you have a blood scythe.)

Out of desperation to sate their addiction, the high elves' leader, Prince Kael'thas (who you will meet in a high-level dungeon), makes a deal with the devil—Illidan—to draw magic from demonic sources instead. And it is with this act that their former buddies, the Alliance, want nothing more to do with the high elves, who, meanwhile, have renamed themselves the blood elves in honor of their fallen people. With nowhere else to turn and desperate for magic, the blood elves choose to join up with the Horde.

DON'T HATE US BECAUSE WE'RE BEAUTIFUL

That's all well and good, but perhaps we haven't answered your question yet. Why would you want to be a blood elf? Well, for one thing, in contrast to the rest of the Horde, they're actually not ugly, and the zones they inhabit are bright and colorful. "One quirk—I won't say problem—about the Horde," says lead designer Jeffrey Kaplan, "is that they are not attractive, and their lands tend to be harsh. So we wanted to give players a more appealing, beautiful race that also fits thematically with the Horde."

In keeping with their magical bent, blood elf players will be able to be mages, warlocks, or priests, along with the obligatory warrior class and either hunters or rogues—Blizzard hasn't decided yet. (No new classes are being introduced in this expansion. "We feel the existing classes have so much room to go," says ›

QUEL'THALAS

The blood elves' home is the kingdom of Quel'Thalas, located just north of the Eastern Plaguelands.

» "THIS IS LEGOLAS AS IF HE WENT DOWN A PRETTY HEAVY PATH."

The blood elves' starting area is Sunstrider Isle, located within Eversong Forest.

MOUNTS?

The blood elf mounts are still not determined. As fledgling game designers ourselves, we would like to suggest Priuses.

Perhaps you didn't notice my hot abs. Here they are again. No touching.

Kaplan, "and we promise that they will be fleshed out, with new mechanics for all of them.")

All blood elves, regardless of class, will begin at level 1 with a special racial ability called Mana Tap. You can use Mana Tap on creatures to recharge your mana (or energy or rage, depending on your class), and then unleash it in a secondary racial ability called Arcane Torrent, which will silence all enemies around you for two seconds, interrupting any spellcasting, and give your mana, rage, or energy a boost.

And what of the blood elf mounts? Wouldn't you like to know...and so would Blizzard, but the designers haven't quit arguing amongst themselves yet. "We've debated everything from unicorns to nether sea horses—but nothing's nailed down yet," says Kaplan.

HOME SWEET HOME?

The blood elves' starting area is Sunstrider Isle, and though the Scourge has destroyed most of their land, this is still a vital, healthy area—as you can see from the screens. "We wanted a look that was the opposite of the night elf look," says Metzen. "Where the night elves live in eternal twilight, we wanted the high elves, at their best, to live in a place of eternal spring and vibrancy. Arthas has destroyed most of it, but some of it still lives on." Blizzard also wanted a different architectural vibe for the blood elves' land. "The night elves have a somewhat Nordic and Japanese architecture," says Metzen. "We wanted something more classical and magical this time."

At this point, Quel'Thalas is set to be composed of roughly three to five zones, including Eversong Forest, the starting zone (and also the location of the blood elf capital, Silvermoon City); the Ghostlands, which border the Eastern Plaguelands to the south; and the Sunwell Plateau, which won't be part of the initial expansion but will be part of a live update down the line. Blizzard is also adding a high-level instanced area, Zul'Aman, home of the forest trolls, as incentive for players to take their old characters up into this new land (see the section on dungeons on the next page).

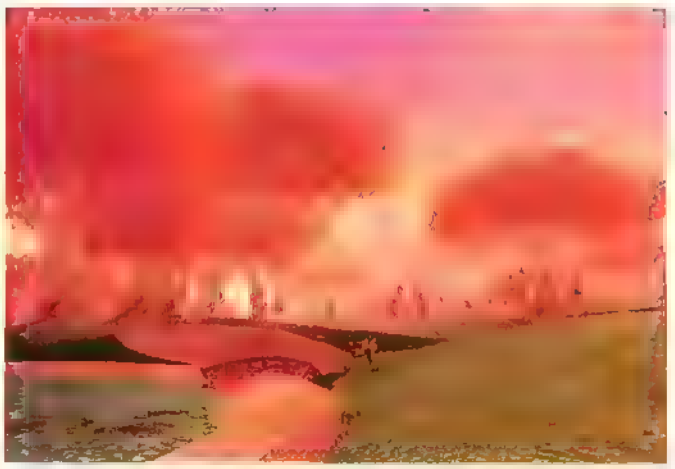
One key goal for Blizzard was to make sure that, for this new Horde race, there was enough variety in the zones to keep things interesting. "We wanted to mix things up more this time," says Rob Pardo, VP of game design. "We learned from Kalimdor that there was just too much of the same thing—too much desert, too much bleakness."

One particularly distinctive feature of this area will be what Metzen jokingly calls the "Road o' Death," the trail that Arthas' army marched through in *WarCraft III*, which completely bisects the land all the way through, including Silvermoon City. "It's a constant reminder to the blood elves," says Metzen, "of just how much s*** these guys have gone through."

> "THIS IS NOT AN EVIL RACE, BUT A PEOPLE THAT HAVE BEEN THROUGH A MASSIVE CULTURAL TRAUMA."

NEW PROFESSION: JEWELCRAFTING!

Blizzard is introducing one new profession in *The Burning Crusade*: jewelcrafting. Players can make rings, trinkets, and more, plus jewels that fit into socketed weapons and armor.



The colorful blood elf area is a far cry from the other Horde zones.

Medivh at Karazhan Tower

THE NEW DUNGEONS

ONLY WIMPS STAY IN THE PUBLIC areas. *WOW*'s real action (and the best loot) is found in the game's gigantic, tough instanced dungeons. For *The Burning Crusade*, Blizzard currently has eight new high-level dungeon areas planned—six of them in Outland and one in the new blood elf area of Quel'Thalas. (The eighth, the Caverns of Time, is a series of dungeons that will continue to be expanded in further live updates—see page 70 for details.) Here's a breakdown of the rest:

KARAZHAN TOWER

Located in the bleak Deadwind Pass in southern Azeroth, this used to be Medivh's castle, but it has been lying in ruins since the original *World of WarCraft*. Now it will be opened up, and inside, players will find a massive, 15-story max-level dungeon, which will host a 20-man raid and feature all sorts of spectral and magical creatures and scripted boss encounters. Rumor has it you may also encounter Khadgar, Medivh's former apprentice, who now fights the good fight against the Burning Legion.

ZUL'AMAN

Zul'Aman is the home of the forest trolls bordering the blood elf region of Quel'Thalas. Blizzard has said this dungeon will likely feature another 20-man raid, with a public area that spills out into Quel'Thalas' Ghostlands and Eversong Forest zones. The targeted player level hasn't been determined yet.

HELLFIRE CITADEL

All we know about this one is that it's the "easiest" dungeon in Outland, is located in the starting zone, Hellfire Peninsula, and targets players between levels 57 and 63.

LADY VASHJ

Not really much of a lady anymore, to be blunt, Lady Vashj is a former highborne elf who is now the leader of the evil sea creatures known as the naga. *WarCraft* nerds familiar with the manuals and novels know that many highborne elves were transformed into naga when the Well of Eternity was destroyed some 10,000 years before the events in *WOW*. Lady Vashj is now one of Illidan's lieutenants, and players between levels 62 and 66 will get to encounter the sea witch in person in her Outland dungeon.

AUCHINDOUN

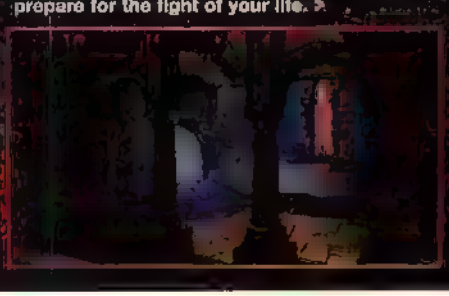
Blizzard is trying something new with Auchindoun, an area located in Outland's Bone Wastes zone and intended for players between levels 65 and 70: It will actually be both a dungeon and a player city. According to lead designer Jeffrey Kaplan, depending on how players raise or lower their reputations with different NPC groups in the area, the city will be either friendly—giving you another base to buy and sell or letting you work on trade skills—or hostile, in which case you'll find yourself battling high-level elite mobs.

TEMPEST KEEP

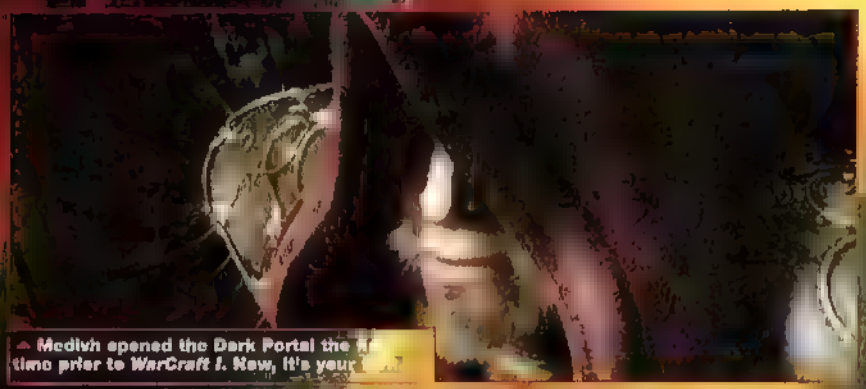
Located off the tip of Netherstorm in Outland, this will be a max-level dungeon that includes roughly three five-man wings and one raid-level wing, which is the keep itself. In the keep, you can expect to encounter Kael'Thas, another former highborne elf (like Lady Vashj) who is now the leader of the blood elves and another one of Illidan's lieutenants in Outland.

BLACK TEMPLE

This is it, kids: your final destination, home of Illidan, *The Burning Crusade*'s big, bad überboss. This former night elf is responsible for all sorts of chaos in the *WarCraft* universe and has been in need of an ass kicking for over 10,000 years. You'll need to be level 70 for said ass kicking—and even then you must prepare for the fight of your life. >



RANDOM WOW FACT #72



▲ Medivh opened the Dark Portal the first time prior to *WarCraft I*. Now, it's your turn.

NEXT STOP:

THE BURNING CRUSADE'S BIGGEST chunk—the place where Blizzard is letting its imagination run wild, the playground where high-level characters will lose themselves all over again—is Outland, the remains of what used to be the planet Draenor, the former orc homeland, now blown apart and floating freely in the "Twisting Nether."

How will players get to Outland from Azeroth? Exactly the way it's always been done: through the Dark Portal—that otherworldly gateway that Medivh opened up way back prior to the original *WarCraft* and that has been the source of all the trouble (and all our fun) in Azeroth ever since. The Dark Portal has been visible but closed to players in *World of WarCraft*, a dormant tourist attraction out in the Blasted Lands zone, but Blizzard plans to open it—or, rather, let players open it via a server-wide überquest—in a live update leading up to the expansion. (The quest details are still in flux, but expect something like a server-wide search for pages of Medivh's old spellbook....)

The reason we would want to open the Dark Portal again and go back to that hellish world is at the heart of *The Burning Crusade*. In the planned live update, super good guy Khadgar, hero of previous games who was presumed lost or dead behind the Dark Portal in Draenor, returns to Azeroth to warn the planet's many inhabitants that the threat of the Burning Legion—a vast army of otherworldly demons and other creatures—is still strong.

"The Burning Crusade," says Metzen, "is the Burning Legion's ongoing war to snuff out all life in the universe, to put it mildly." Khadgar explains to the varied races of Azeroth that though they may have withstood the Burning Legion twice, the bad guys are still marching across the universe, burning planets and crushing everyone in their path—and that mortal heroes (like you) must join the fight.

Outland is a portal world, a nexus to all the other worlds, so this is where we must go to start hunting the Burning Legion. But when we do, we'll just happen to run into longtime bad guy, Illidan, who has taken refuge here from the Burning Legion, sealing all the portals in the process. We'll get the chance to settle our bill with Illidan in the game's final, toughest dungeon.

RANDOM WOW FACT #28

Between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. on September 14, 2006, the first night the 20-man raid zone in Stranglethorn Vale opened up, 2,600 instances were started in the United States alone.

OUTLAND

THROUGH THE DARK PORTAL

Outland is a medium-sized, multizone world targeted at players from around level 54 all the way up to the new cap of 70 (see sidebar on page 71). "We didn't want you to have to be level 60 already to enter," says Jeffrey Kaplan, "because we want players—even your newer blood elf characters—to be able to go there as soon as possible. At the same time, there is going to be tons and tons of endgame content to keep you happy for a long time."

When you first go through the Dark Portal, you'll arrive on Hellfire Peninsula, site of many battles in the *WarCraft II* expansion, still littered with old orc and human bases. Other zones include the lush Zangor Marsh, the spooky Blaze Edge mountains (shown here), the chewed-out Bone Wastes, and the surreal Netherstorm on the continent's outer fringes. Things will get even crazier once you open portals into other worlds—three zones are already planned for the expansion, with seven total that Blizzard knows about.

"One of the things we're most excited about," says Motzen, "is the chance to create environments unlike anything you've seen in previous games. We really want to ramp it up for the players now. We're saying, 'Hey, you've graduated, you're over level 60 now, so let's get crazy with some really alien worlds and creatures.' Even better, this is something that's infinitely expandable for us in updates and expansions down the line. There can always be more portal worlds."

"THERE IS TONS OF ENDGAME CONTENT IN OUTLAND THAT WILL KEEP YOU HAPPY FOR A LONG TIME."

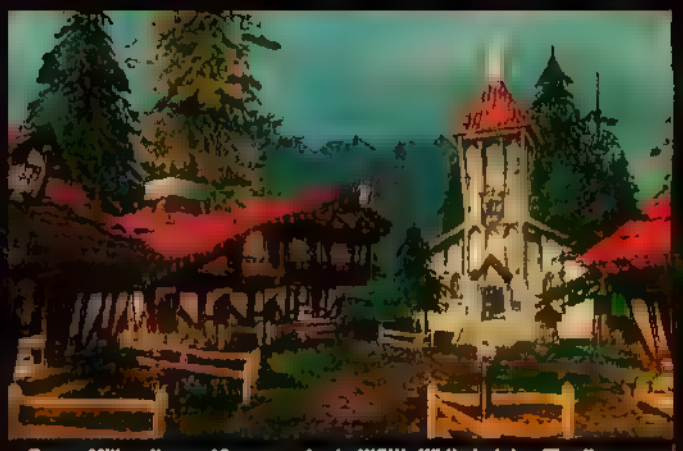
While all of the *WOW* races will have strong motivating incentives to go to Outland—those of the Alliance to kick Burning Legion arse, the orcs to see how their culture began on their home planet, the blood elves to tap into that groovy demonic magic—the designers are delighted to also point out that the relative "truce" between them all (well, except on PVP servers) will have no place on Outland.

"It's like the Wild West out there," says Motzen. "It's far from home. There are Horde and Alliance leaders stuck out in Outland going nuts, like Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now*."

"In *WarCraft III*," says Kaplan, "we brought all the races together. We've learned in *WOW*, though, that the more everybody hates each other, the better."

You hear that, everyone? No CareBears in Outland. Blizzard has made it official.

▲ The Dark Portal as it appears in the Caverns of Time. You'll travel back in time and protect Medivh as he opens it for the very first time.



▲ Tarren Mill as it was 10 years prior to *WOW*. While helping Thrall escape Durnholde Keep, you'll see this older version of the contested zone.

THE CAVERNS OF TIME: WARCRAFT'S GREATEST HITS

ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING components of *The Burning Crusade* is a new series of instanced dungeons in Tanaris (intended for players between levels 60 and 70) known collectively as the Caverns of Time. In *WarCraft* lore, the Caverns of Time are a natural labyrinth, with portals leading to different eras in Azeroth's past, protected by ancient bronze dragonflights. "The story line woven through [the Caverns of Time component]," says VP of Creative Development Chris Metzen, "is that there are forces in the world trying to screw with the timeline and affect critical moments of the past." It will be the players' job (regardless of faction) to go through these portals and into Azeroth's past to make sure these critical moments in the *WarCraft* continuity happen exactly as they were meant to happen.

What this means for players is they will have an entertaining opportunity to relive events from the *WarCraft* strategy games (as well as key moments from the manuals and novels) within a *WOW* setting. For Blizzard, it means an infinitely expandable set of dungeons limited only by the designers' imagination.

The following are some of the instances planned for the shipping expansion:

THRALL'S ESCAPE FROM DURNHOLDE KEEP

This keep in the Hillsbrad Foothills, now controlled by the Syndicate, is where, years ago, a human officer named Aedelas Blackmoore captured and raised an orc baby he called Thrall. Blackmoore planned to use the orc for his own nefarious purposes, but Thrall escaped and over time rose to become leader of the orcs. In this instanced quest, you'll go back 10 years to help Thrall escape Durnholde Keep and begin his march toward destiny.

THE OPENING OF THE DARK PORTAL

What is now the Blasted Lands used to be called the Black Morass, and it is on this spot many years ago that Medivh, a powerful mage, fatefully opened the Dark Portal that brought the orcs swarming into Azeroth from their homeworld of Draenor. In this instance, you will go back to this crucial pre-*WarCraft* event and actually defend Medivh as he opens the portal. Why would you want to do this? Just think, if that portal were never opened, there would be no *WarCraft* games at all!

THE BATTLE OF MOUNT HYJAL

In the final level of *WarCraft III*, the orcs, humans, and night elves stop bickering and band together to defend the World Tree, source of the world's magic, and put a stop to the demon lord Archimonde and the Burning Legion once and for all. It's an epic battle, and now it will be re-created as a huge raid event in the Caverns of Time. ("The kids wanted something epic," says lead designer Jeffrey Kaplan. "We're giving them something epic.")

BATTLE ON HELLFIRE PENINSULA

This one is still in the planning stages and is definitely subject to change, but the idea behind this instance is to stage a big PVP battleground on the Hellfire Peninsula similar to the circumstances here 30 years ago in the *WarCraft II* expansion, when orcs and humans were battling it out before Draenor blew itself apart and became the floating planetoid now known as Outland.

RANDOM WOW FACT #6

[redacted] quests alone, so that's why it seems like you're never done. And, according to the designers, that's cut down from the original number.

"THE KIDS WANTED SOMETHING EPIC."

Say hello to the qiraji. They've been asleep for thousands of years. Now they're awake. And angry.

MEET THE QIRAJI

WE HAVE BAD NEWS FOR YOU. THERE are bugs in the upcoming 1.9 patch. Giant bugs. Giant killer bugs that have been trapped and lying dormant behind a wall for thousands of years and will now be set free. Scheduled for release sometime in November, the 1.9 patch will introduce the insectlike qiraji to *World of WarCraft* in two big instanced zones—one in the form of a smaller, more casual outdoor 20-man raid, the other a 40-man endgame dungeon raid.

Players who have ventured down to the southwestern part of Silithus in Kalimdor may have already seen the gigantic Scarab Wall, which was closed thousands of years ago by the Titans to seal off the qiraji and their city kingdom, Ahn'Qiraj. The Titans feared the qiraji (who are linked to the nerubian spider civilization up north) because of their worship of dark powers and old gods—never a good thing.

Just how fast the gates of the Scarab Wall open so that you can begin kicking qiraji butt, however, is going to depend on you and the other folks on your server.

"This is something we've never done before," says lead designer Jeffrey Kaplan. "To open the gates, there will be server-wide quests. Everyone on the server will need to band together to get these quests done and open the gates."

Blizzard doesn't want this to just be a "max-level" event for uberplayers. According to the current plan, NPC emissaries will begin showing up in Horde and Alliance cities, requiring vast amounts of resources to start a war against the awakening qiraji. So players of all levels can contribute iron, for example, to help the war effort. "There will be an epic component that will require a raid," says Kaplan, "but to get to that point, you'll need buy-in from the entire server." Once the gates are opened, they're open for good, and the reward will be the two instanced zones.

Of course, not all servers will open the gates at the same time—and Blizzard likes it this way. "It should be a neat competition between servers," says Kaplan. Just how long it will take for the first server to open the gates is unclear. "We're not sure," admits Kaplan. "For the best server to go insane, spending 24 hours a day on it, they might get it open in two to three weeks." And don't worry, by the way, if your server sucks. "If you're on a slacker server," said Kaplan, "it won't take you four years to open the gates—we promise. We're making sure there are mechanisms to help the slower servers along." /

AHN'QIRAJ

The city kingdom of Ahn'Qiraj looks like it may have been created after a particularly bad dose of mushrooms.

LIFE BEYOND LEVEL 60 "Ten new levels?! That's it?!"

[redacted] reach the new level 70 cap sometime between [redacted]—already. However, Blizzard insists the level cap was determined after all the new content was in, and that anything higher would have been artificial.

"We didn't want to get into a situation where we raised the level cap by 50, but you're standing on Hellfire Peninsula for two weeks killing felboars just to get to the next zone," says lead designer Jeffrey Kaplan. "We didn't want to drag it out artificially—players are going to feel that. We think part of the success of *WOW* is the fact that you can really feel your progression. We didn't want any glaring time sinks, and we didn't want to water down the gameplay."

Or as VP of creative development Chris Metzen puts it, "It's about focusing in on what's cool, dialing it in, and building 10 kick-ass levels for players to reach."

[redacted] new content for players once they do hit level 70. "One of the things we weren't happy about with the skipping version of *WOW* was having enough endgame content," says producer Rob Pardo. "This time, we really want to make sure there are lots of endgame dungeons and raids, lots of choices for the players to still make. It's not just about leveling to 70, but what you do at level 70."

Want an example? How about the ability for level 70 players to get a flying mount? (You'll be able to fly only in Outland, which is being built with player flight in mind—the original world would break with flying mounts.)

"At the end of the day," says Pardo, "we know what good content feels like. If you look at our previous expansions [like *StarCraft: Brood War*], [you'll find that] people have never felt like we've underdelivered, and I don't think this will be the first time."

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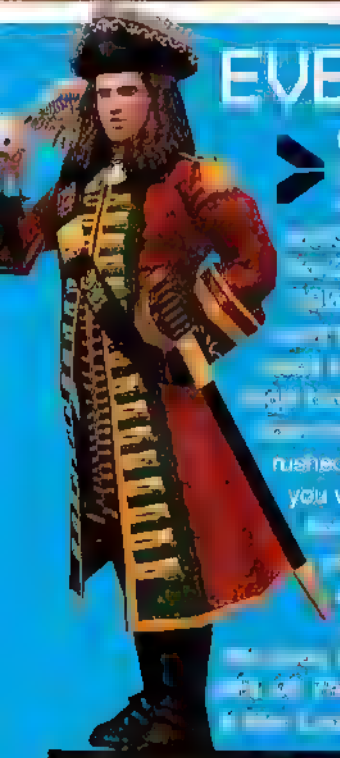

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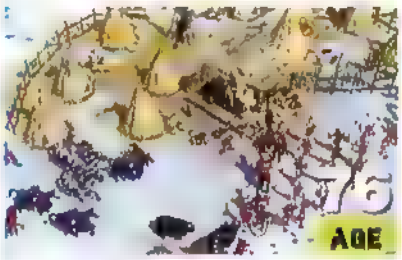
INSIDE



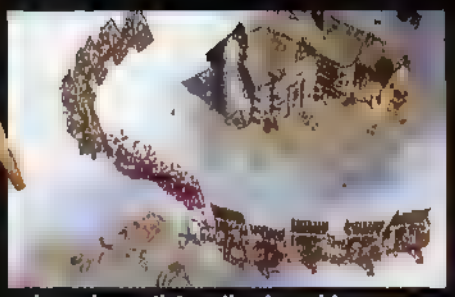
Age of Empires III
The empire is falling.

Black & White 2
More like shades of gray.

Serious Sam II
Serious fun, too.

The home city screens pretty, pointless, and fully 3D.

Clash of the titans!



Iroquois mantlets gather 'round for a friendly siege.

AGE OF EMP

Just like the olden days

DELIGHTFUL, DISAPPOINTING, and frustrating—*Age of Empires III* in a nutshell. In many ways, *AOE3* acts as a shrewd follow-up to developer Ensemble Studios' acclaimed *Age* series, incorporating choice bits of *Age of Mythology* with the history-buff reverence of the *Empires* games. But in many other ways, it paints a clumsy and confused picture of what might have been.

AOE3 works hard to appease hardcore RTS players who hungrily tore into the previous games with spreadsheets and stopwatches. Effective strategies still involve carefully minding the +10 percent here and -25 percent there. You still have to micromanage your villagers, who require lots of shepherding even though they don't have to walk back and forth to town centers (which are oddly treated as if they're not superfluous). Your units still follow the same rock-paper-scissors dynamic, with added variations that come with unique units and later ages. You must still carefully mind your artillery while they limber, unlimber, and then limber again. And on water maps, well, you still have that much more to contend with. To summarize: old-school gameplay made for old-school players.

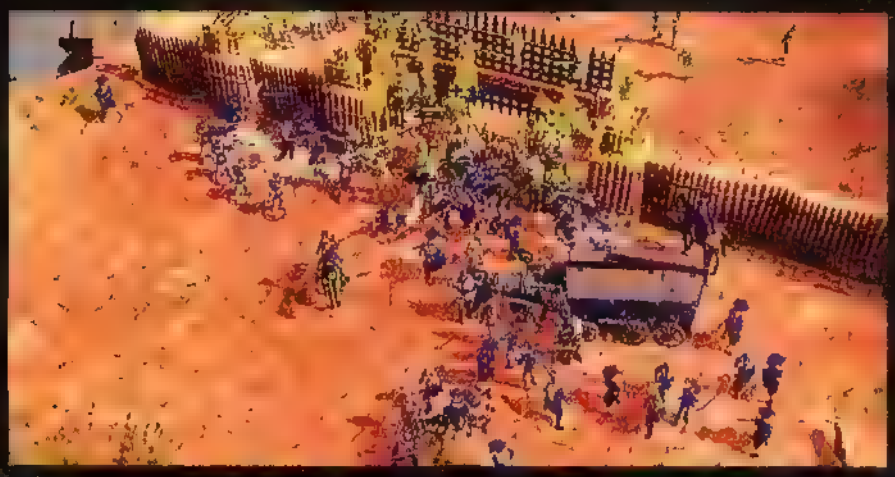
A valid approach, yes, but one that lacks key interface features. Too much information either goes unprovided or gets tucked into obscure places. Selected units are lumped under tiny tabs that offer no helpful information about who's hurt and who's set to what formation, which are crucial parts of combat management.

And where did all the hotkeys go? Ensemble expects you to play most of the game with tiny, inconvenient buttons. There are too many oversights, such as not being able to give units an attack order via the minimap. Of all RTS developers, shouldn't Ensemble know better than to make these kinds of rookie mistakes? The difference between micromanagement and strategy usually boils down to the interface: A game like *Rise of Nations* is every bit as detailed, but its interface helps it rise to the occasion...while *AOE3*, sometimes a morass of barely assisted micromanagement, doesn't.

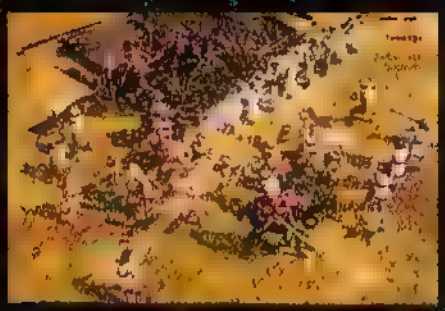
HIT THE DECK

The main innovation here is the "home city," which gives Ensemble a chance to show off a completely pointless and noninteractive 3D city screen. Before each game, you build a deck of "cards," each representing a gift (in the form of military units, bonuses, or even buildings) to your colony from back home. It's a solid idea for number crunchers, and it really comes into its own once you start leveling up your city and tailoring a deck to fit your strategy. For some reason, you have to pick your cards before you know what map you're playing—a strange design choice. After all, who's going to bother wasting valuable deck space on cards from the harbor when the odds are against a naval map?

Other innovations include mighty forts and lucrative factories that can't be rebuilt (position them carefully and guard them closely!), a trade route that provides income to everyone who controls depots along the way, and an explorer who runs around collecting resources while you're in that dull early stage of waiting to get enough food so you can advance to the next age. One particularly clever touch: You can call dibs on Native American settlements, which let you recruit troops that don't count toward your population limit. This comes in quite



Gate-crushers!

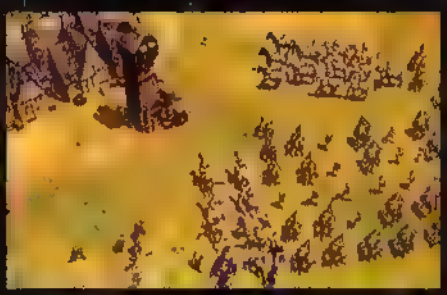


Nootka, Uhlan, Uhlan, Nootka.

Our words are backed with cannon power!

A fully upgraded trade route steams past the Ottoman capital.

Sometimes, when two ships love each other very much...



The pinkeens are coming! The pinkeens are coming!

IRES III

handy during endgame stalemates.

These deadlocks occur with surprising frequency, since *AOE3* lacks the equivalent to big berthas, titans, or wonders of the world, nor are there any map-control victory conditions. To win, you're forced to quite literally kill every last villager...and if you leave a player alone long enough, he'll have a self-sustaining economy of plantations and factories, all entrenched behind well-guarded walls. Enjoy the standoff. In an effort to make all strategies (rushing, booming, or turtling) viable, it feels like Ensemble is saying, "Figure out your own way to make the other guy call it quits."

SKIN DEEP

A few smaller nitpicks come courtesy of *AOE3*'s beautiful visuals. Because the game looks so good, it calls attention to things you might not otherwise mind. Those tall wooden ships sure are majestic...until one of them parks with its bow through the ass end of another ship. Cavalry tilt at crazy angles going up slopes, shuffling and twirling all the while. Masses of infantry look impressive when arrayed in formation—but when a battle starts, everyone dissolves into an indiscriminate mass of guys wearing bright red, bright blue, or whatever other team color you picked. It makes for great screenshots but does diddly squat for gameplay.

Still, even a bad RTS from Ensemble is better than a mediocre RTS from just about anyone else. With the new lush game engine and the company's obvious enthusiasm for the subject matter, Ensemble knows how to make all those doppelsoldners, streiets, and culverins look sexy, even if you don't know what they are. And that's half way toward making a really good RTS. But only half way. / **Tom Chick**

AOE3 IS SOMETIMES A MORASS OF BARELY ASSISTED MICROMANAGEMENT

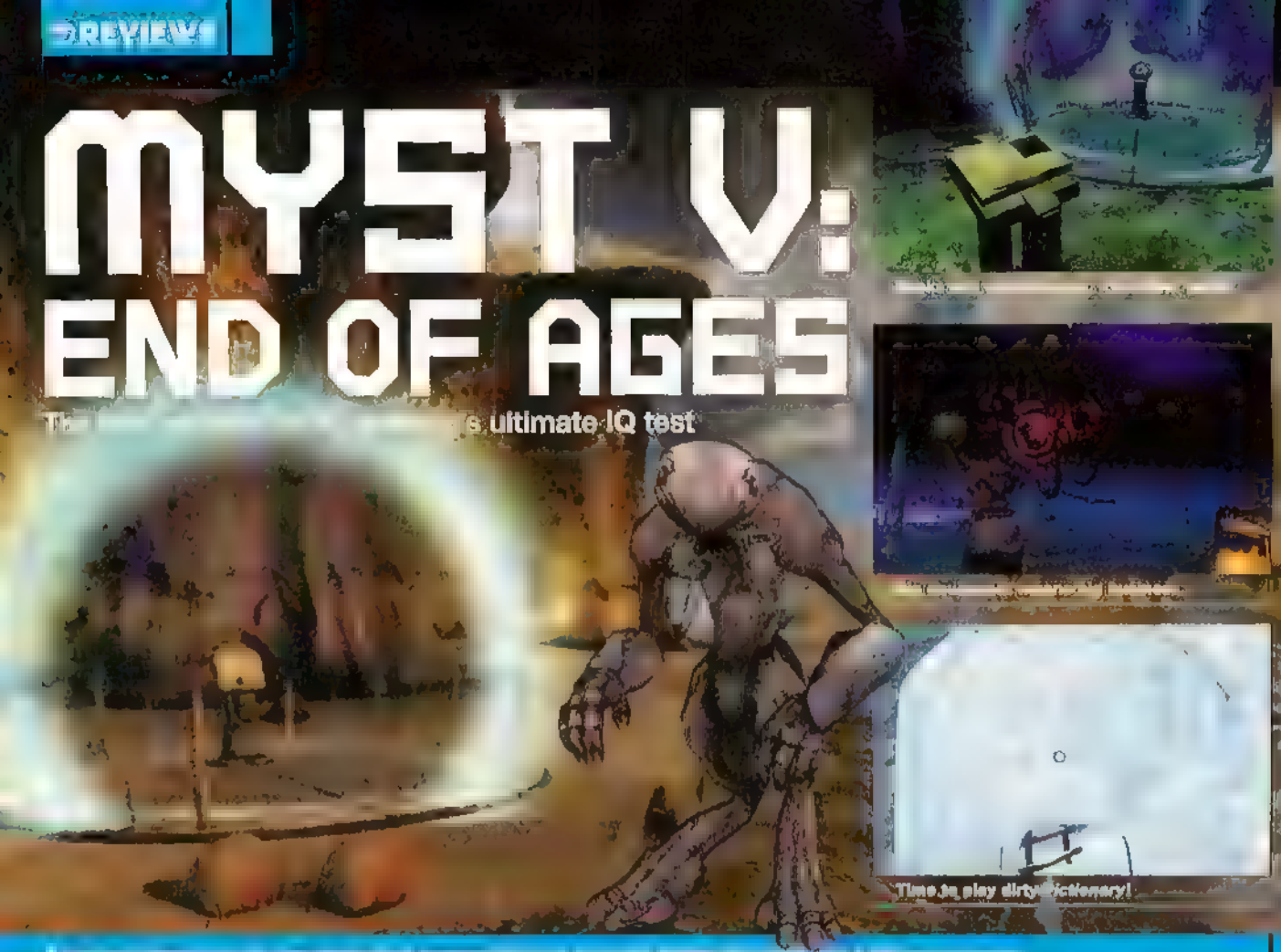
INDIAN GIVING

Older school than it should have been.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★☆☆

MYST V: END OF AGES

The ultimate IQ test



Time to play dirty dictionary!

THE *MYST* GAMES HAVE ALWAYS MADE for good excuses to spend some quality snuggling time with your noggin. And that snuggling time in the grand finale of the series, *Myst V: End of Ages*, is *rough*.

Don't expect anything exponentially groundbreaking. The gameplay leans heavily on interconnected puzzles, such as opening the correct valves to create a living coral walkway across frozen waters, matching celestial symbols seen from stone towers by operating a complex telescope system, and manipulating counterweights in an abandoned arena. You still get plenty of signature *Myst* puzzles, which offer creative and challenging IQ tests in postcard-landscape disguises...the centerpiece being an odd system of stone tablets. Yes, stone tablets. Exciting, eh?

THE STONE AGE

These tablets facilitate communication with the bahros—skittish and initially creepy ape creatures encountered throughout the various ages (*Myst*'s fancy word for "worlds"). The bahros' language equates basic symbols to actions, which acts as the core of *Myst V*'s gameplay. Bahros perform actions associated with the symbols that you carve into the tablets...and, of course, these actions are all somehow interwoven into every problem you encounter. For example, you might discover a symbol early on, and after carving it into a tablet and leaving it for a bahro to discover, the screen steams up—indicating the bahro sign for heat. This connection helps you solve a heat-related puzzle later in the game; this and other similar uses of tablets across the ages offer a different taste of the seemingly unchanging *Myst* cuisine of puzzles. It takes some time to get used to the bahro-symbol-tablet dynamic, and while the system itself isn't brain busting, it's certainly time-consuming.

The bahros and their tablets comprise just one fraction of the grand finale of the *Myst* saga; even for those new to the series, *Myst V* does a fine job of summarizing the story thus far with main character Yeesha's journals, found throughout the starting area. Yeesha is the deeply troubled daughter of the original *Myst*'s primary character, and her story presents a compelling morality play that's as rich as it is convoluted. But unlike in most adventure games, you're not just a mindless sheep being railroaded through the plot—in the end, it's you who gets to decide the fate of the *Myst* world. Take that, determinism!

AGE OF SLOWDOWN

The ages themselves paint gorgeous backdrops for you to explore...assuming your hardware is up to snuff. On slower machines, it's Choppsville—Population: You. Other technical issues hold the game back, too; a lack of sound effects shatters the suspension of disbelief, and the game's height perception fluctuates wildly—at times you can walk up a very steep hill, but sometimes your virtual legs just can't take the strain of climbing a mild hump. Reasonably small flaws, yes, but they rip you away from the experience just enough to be annoying. The new navigation controls make up for this somewhat; instead of the typical node-based point-and-click movement routine, *Myst V* allows you to map the controls to a standard WASD scheme, making for a much more fluid experience.

Myst V isn't a rosebud twist ending to the series but rather a distinguished, picturesque, and more-than-sufficient finale. Purist adventure games don't have the same gravitas as they used to, but this game stays true to what developer Cyan Worlds sought to create...without ever straying into the realm of today's gaming "requirements" of adrenaline-packed action. Technical minutiae aside, *Myst V* acts as a fitting swan song for this beloved franchise./**Karen Chu (from 1UP.com)**

> IN THE END, IT'S YOU WHO GETS TO DECIDE THE FATE OF THE *MYST* WORLD.

A head-scratchin' good time.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★½☆

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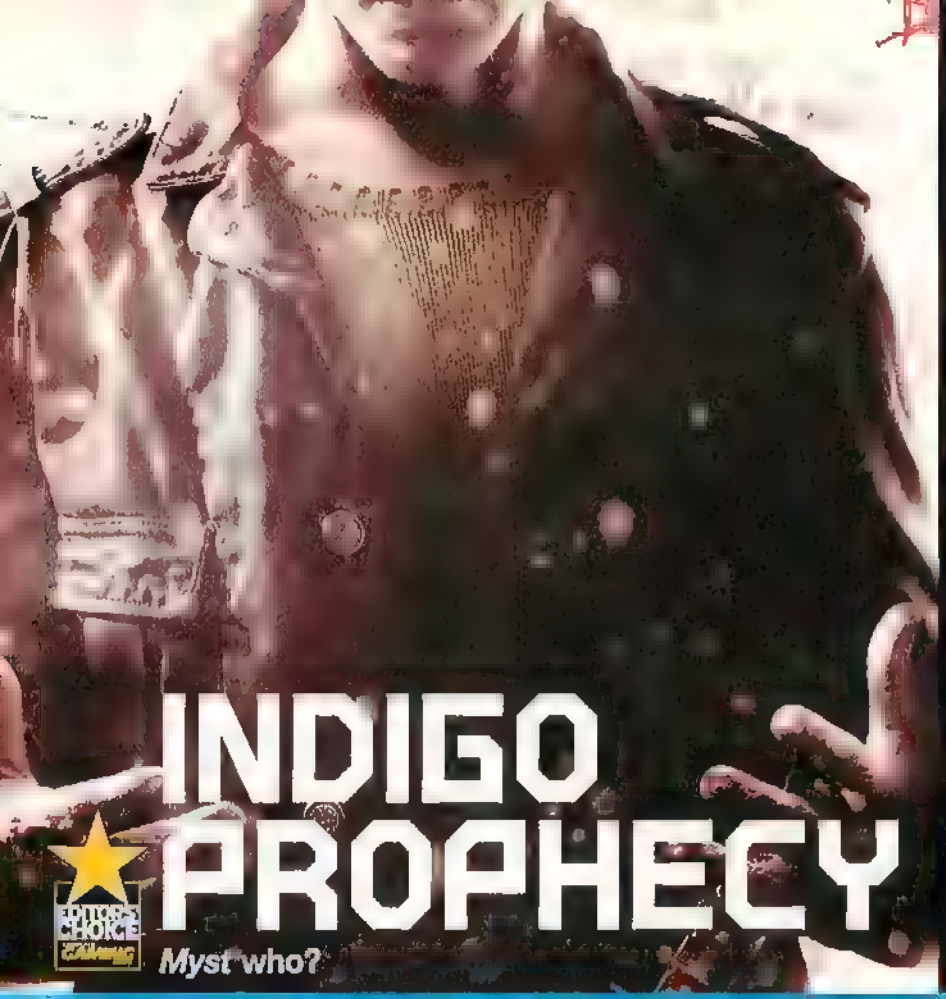

INDIGO PROPHECY

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Myst who?

The very brutal, very disturbing murder scene that opens the game unfolds in an extremely well-directed sequence.

Your interaction with *Indigo*'s spectacular set pieces is often as simple as jamming on two buttons to build up a power meter.

AFTER BEING PASSED AROUND like a hot potato from publisher to publisher, undergoing a somewhat inexplicable name change from *Fahrenheit* to *Indigo Prophecy* in the United States, and being shamefully overlooked by the majority of the gaming press, Quantic Dream's reinterpretation of the adventure genre ultimately turns out to be a remarkable experience. *Indigo* delivers on the promise of the "interactive movie" (more than 10 years after the term was originally coined), and does so by relying on strong characters, an intelligent and well-written story, and a singular vision from game director David Cage.

Cage cites his primary creative influences as David Fincher's visual sensibility in *Se7en*, Adrian Lyne's methods of warping reality in *Jacob's Ladder*, and Alan Parker's character development in *Angel Heart*. These influences remain clear throughout *Indigo*, and a discernible level of tension perseveres during the game's eight-plus hours of play. This is a mature story in the truest sense of the word—nothing about it comes off as gratuitous or sensational; rather, the experience is aimed squarely at adults, with a focus on relationships, introspection, and beautifully constructed horror-fantasy.

WHODUNIT?

The opening scene sets the tone extremely well. Cast as a murderer caught in a deranged act of violence, you quickly realize that the plot revolves around trying to figure out exactly what the hell is going on. As soon as you start to develop sympathy for this character, the focus suddenly shifts—and you're cast as a homicide detective who's investigating the aforementioned murder alongside her partner. From here, the story line splits and splits again, gradually weaving together the lives of these three protagonists.

Because of *Indigo*'s narrative-driven structure, the actual game itself feels almost passive at times. The story unfolds via expertly directed scenes, with your interaction limited to simple operations that fall into two categories: The traditional adventure-game-style play has you interacting with detailed environments and characters, while a Simon Says–style rhythm exercise fuels the action sequences. It's an incredibly simple yet effective mechanic, and you'll probably have to train yourself to focus more on the simple circles of color than on the amazing scenery—but once you get in the zone, it's quite rewarding. The mechanics soon become transparent in their simplicity, which allows you to completely immerse yourself in the story.

DEUS EX MACHINA

The only major fault stems from the same problem that we see in many films: After a thoughtful and tense first and second act, the third romps toward its conclusion at such an accelerated lick that you start to wonder if you missed something. What starts off as a spooky detective story eventually becomes something resembling *The Matrix*. Entire factions rise in significance out of nowhere, and motivations seem to appear purely for the convenience of reaching the conclusion faster.

Thanks to its branching nature and multiple story paths, different gamers will see the same scenes in different lights—and this really adds to the way you're going to feel about the game at the end. *Indigo Prophecy* marks a tremendous rebirth for a very stagnant genre. Let's hope its mature style serves as an inspiration for other developers. / **John Davison**

THIS IS A MATURE STORY IN THE TRUEST SENSE OF THE WORD—NOTHING ABOUT IT COMES OFF AS GRATUITOUS.

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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

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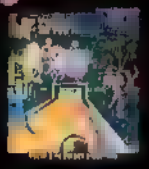

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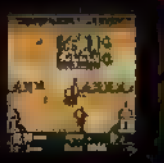
BROTHERS IN ARMS EARNED IN BLOOD



KEYWORD: BIA

PRINCE OF PERSIA WARRIOR WITHIN

KEYWORD: POP

PLATINUM SOLITAIRE

KEYWORD: CARD

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BLITZKRIEG 2

Real-time puzzle solving

PUBLISHER: CDV Software DEVELOPER: Nival Interactive GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: 1.7GHz CPU, 256MB MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

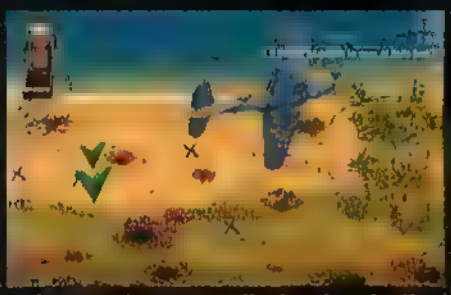
FOR SUCH A WELL-DOCUMENTED PERIOD in military history, World War II sure does get short shrift when it comes to real-time strategy games...and *Blitzkrieg 2* doesn't do much to improve matters. Like its predecessor—and many other WWII RTS look-alikes—this game replaces tactical choice with linear puzzle-solving gameplay.

Blitzkrieg 2 features three campaigns: America's war in the Pacific, Germany's rampage through Europe and North Africa, and the Soviets' homeland defense. Each campaign presents a series of operations that is divided into several skirmishes and capped off with a decisive battle. In these skirmishes, you gain access to reinforcements, new unit types, and additional equipment; the officers under your command also earn experience for their battlefield performance. Higher ranks unlock more officers, each specializing in a particular type of combat vehicle, such as bombers or tanks. A given officer improves as his branch participates in the fight, as do the individual units under his command.

While this reward system sets *Blitzkrieg 2* slightly apart from other WWII strategy games, the scenario design undermines its originality. Your objectives are varied and include defensive stands as well as special operations incursions—but the solutions all feel painfully similar. Overwhelming odds cloud most missions, dooming conventional tactics to utter failure right from the outset. Instead of engaging in direct assaults, you're forced to inch forward, scout the enemy, blast them with artillery or aerial strikes, and repeat. Luckily, the A.I. is too stupid to respond to any attack outside of its visual range, allowing you to pick off your enemies piecemeal.

As with many other games of this kind, victory becomes a question of trial and error, patience, and puzzle solving rather than any sort of real tactical acumen. If you can resign yourself to treating *Blitzkrieg 2* as a puzzle game first and foremost, it can be enjoyable. As a strategy game, the missions are just too damn linear to be much fun. / **DI Luo**

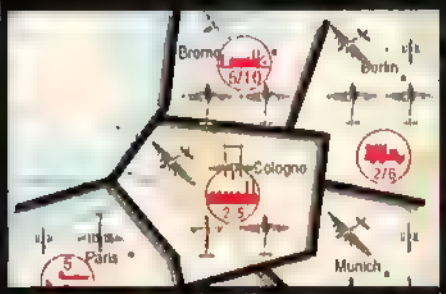
▲ Highway of death: Soviet artillery blasts fleeing Germans.



▲ Japanese troops assault a beach under the cover of aerial fire. Banzai!

Decent combat system, good-looking engine, mediocre scenario design.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★☆☆



▲ Campaigns range from three-turn minibattles to eight-turn epics.

▲ Because it's a strategy game, position is abstracted to reduce the playing area.

Easy to play, tough to tear yourself away from.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

DOWN IN FLAMES

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Up in arms

PUBLISHER: Battlefront.com DEVELOPER: Dan Verssen Games GENRE: Strategy ESRB RATING: NR REQUIRED: 800MHz, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: Internet (2-4 players)

DOWN IN FLAMES DEFINITIVELY BRINGS the "game" back into war gaming. This turn-based WWII air combat title, based on an award-winning board game design, might be the most addictive substance to grace strategy grognards' desktops since 2004's *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps*. *DIF*'s mechanics can be equated to a collectible-card game, but the simple yet effective animations and sounds make this much more than an aerial version of Go Fish. The genius of the design lies in how a few simple numerics (such as performance, horsepower, and burst) manage to capture the essential characteristics of WWII's best-known aircraft. Players take the helms of American and German fighters in both solo and online multiplayer dogfights—where the possibility of getting your ace pilots permanently killed makes things quite intense. Publisher Battlefront.com also maintains a detailed leaderboard, so you can see exactly where your pilots stack up in the pantheon of aces.

BREAK OUT THE DICE

Want to check out the *Down in Flames* board game? Go to www.gmtgames.com to pick up a copy

While the dogfights are compelling in their own right, the game really comes into its own in the campaigns. These preset, multiround games begin with players first allocating their aircraft to bomb or defend objectives; each aerial confrontation is then fought in turn, with points scored for each objective destroyed (or kept safe). The real twist here: Pilots accumulate fatigue while flying, so your hands stay quite full as you simultaneously manage your air force and cover all your bases.

Like its board-game counterpart, *DIF* emphasizes ease of play over hard realism—meaning that some war-game purists might be annoyed by the level of abstract gameplay presented here. But those purists are missing a real gem: For $35, you get a ton of replayability plus new downloadable planes and campaigns each month. For those who don't mind abstraction in the name of fun, *DIF* is a must-have. / **Bruce Geryk**

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WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—WINTER ASSAULT

The universal war continues...couldn't we hug instead?

▲ Keep those weak-willed Imperial guard troops garrisoned or be ready to reinforce often.

▲ Say hi to my Baneblade. Now prepare to die.

Subtlety is not the point in a game where massive armies rip each other to shreds—hence that shiny M rating.

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A DEDICATED *Warhammer* dork—or even a particularly hardcore real-time strategy fan—to appreciate just how great last year's *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* is. It achieved two important things at once: it made *Warhammer* accessible to those of us who've never been able to penetrate the dense tabletop miniatures game and it added a hearty, bone-crushing jolt of adrenaline to a mostly moribund genre. In *Dawn of War*, fast-paced action takes center stage over resource gathering and other dainty economic pursuits.

For the *Winter Assault* expansion pack, developer Relic Entertainment succeeds in the rare act of making an expansion that's actually better than its base product—at least in terms of the single-player experience. This isn't merely a few new units and maps slapped together in a box, but rather a full-on new game (requiring the original, of course) that stays challenging and entertaining for a good long while.

IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

Hardcore *Warhammer* fanatics might argue that the one new playable race, the Imperial guard, is a rather boring choice given some of the more exotic factions that exist in *Warhammer* creator Games Workshop's vast sci-fi/fantasy universe. And even to a nonobsessive like me, the Imperial guard seems awfully similar (especially at first) to its fellow "humie" faction, the space marines. The balance differences soon become quite apparent, though; the new faction offers lots of defensive options for those who prefer "turtling" instead of aggressive conquest, as well as a mostly infantry-based army that can garrison in any building and move around the map via a series of connected tunnels. In addition, vehicular units such as the late-game Baneblade are massive and virtually indestructible—perfect for those of us who like to wait before attacking. Still, if you're looking for something new and exciting for multiplayer matches, the Imperial guard is a bit of a letdown.

Where *Winter Assault* really shines is in its two single-player campaigns. These basically tell the same story, *Rashomon* style, from both the good ("order") and evil ("disorder") sides, while deftly addressing everyone's main complaint about the original *Dawn of War* campaign—that is, the fact that you got to play only as the space marines. This time you not only control *all* the factions, but often end up switching between armies mid-mission. You might begin a mission as, say, the eldar and then switch to the Imperial guard after completing a few objectives. At some points you'll even be able to switch on the fly between two factions at once—which could have been scattershot and confusing but ends up quite engaging and cool.

HAMMERED

My only small complaint about the campaigns is that they're really hard right out of the gate. Yes, that's what players want from an expansion...but because the original didn't *require* you to play as the orks, eldar, or chaos marines, you may find yourself quickly overwhelmed as you try to get a grip on how these factions work. Some advice for the uninitiated: Play a few random skirmish maps before tackling the campaigns.

Relic has been hit or miss with its past strategy games (ranging from *Homeworld* to *Impossible Creatures*), but with the *Warhammer 40,000* license, it has found the perfect playground for RTS design, with visceral action, outstanding graphics and sound, and big dollops of goofy humor (any game whose units tell me to "sod off" when I click on them is one I want to play). *Winter Assault* further cements *Dawn of War* as one of the great next-gen strategy titles. If you thought you were sick of the genre, come back. This is worth it.

/Jeff Green

A solid expansion to a great game--but those Imperial Guard are a tad dull.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★½

SOME ADVICE FOR THE UNINITIATED: PLAY A FEW RANDOM SKIRMISH MAPS BEFORE TACKLING THE CAMPAIGNS.

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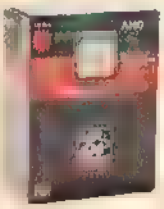

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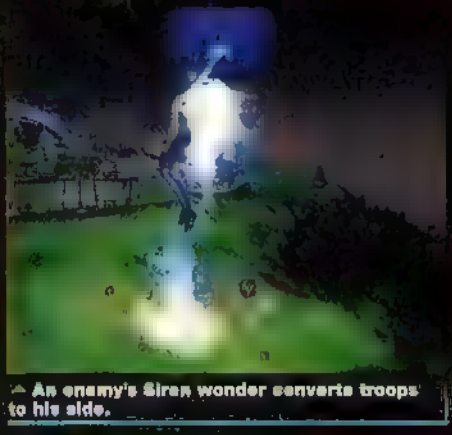
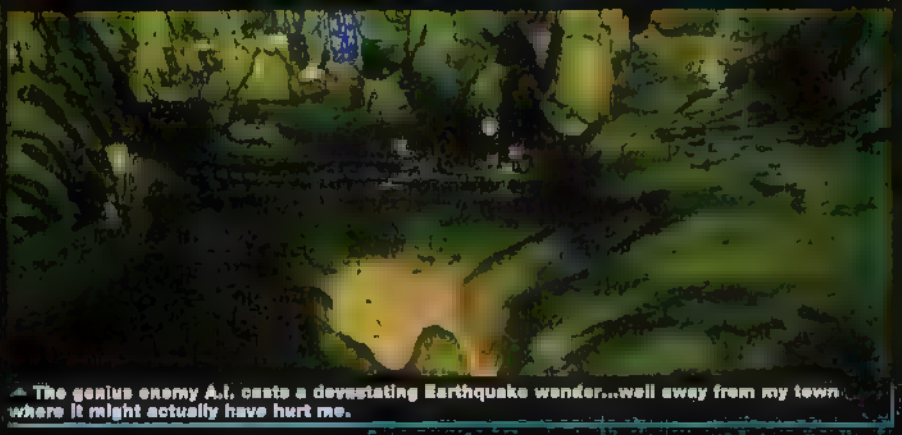
Creature-versus-creature showdown! Too bad you have absolutely no part to play in this potentially dramatic conflict.



An enemy's Siren wonder converts troops to his side.



The genius enemy A.I. casts a devastating Earthquake wonder...well away from my town where it might actually have hurt me.

A ticking clock accompanies the assimilation of an enemy town center. Thrilling!

BLACK & W

God isn't dead—but he is on life support

OH HOW I WANTED TO LOVE THIS game. Wanted to love it as badly as I once wanted to believe that women might actually find me physically attractive, and for much the same reason—it would make life much more pleasant. And while I and *Black & White 2* have not deteriorated to Elephant Man wretchedness, we're both headed decidedly south. For me, simple genetics hold me back, but with *Black & White 2* it's a host of sins, chiefly of omission, resulting in a game pitted by a host of lacunae in virtually every aspect of play, thus creating a God game in its unlovely, pockmarked image.

THE ETERNAL QUESTIONS

Are you a good witch or a bad witch? This question forms the crux of *B&W2*, which casts you as a near-omniscient deity guiding a flock of worshipful, cartoonish Greeks victimized by equally cartoonish Aztecs. Your presence onscreen seems limited to a disembodied hand...but in truth, like the undying spirit of Elvis, you are everywhere—with every facet of your followers' lives and world reflecting your good (or evil) work. As a beneficent lord, you'll create a shining earthly paradise; choose a darker path and you'll create a blighted landscape, your civilization's buildings lit with flame and painted with graffiti. It all makes for one of the sharpest-looking games in years, and the simple act of exploring the world provides a tremendous amount of pleasure.

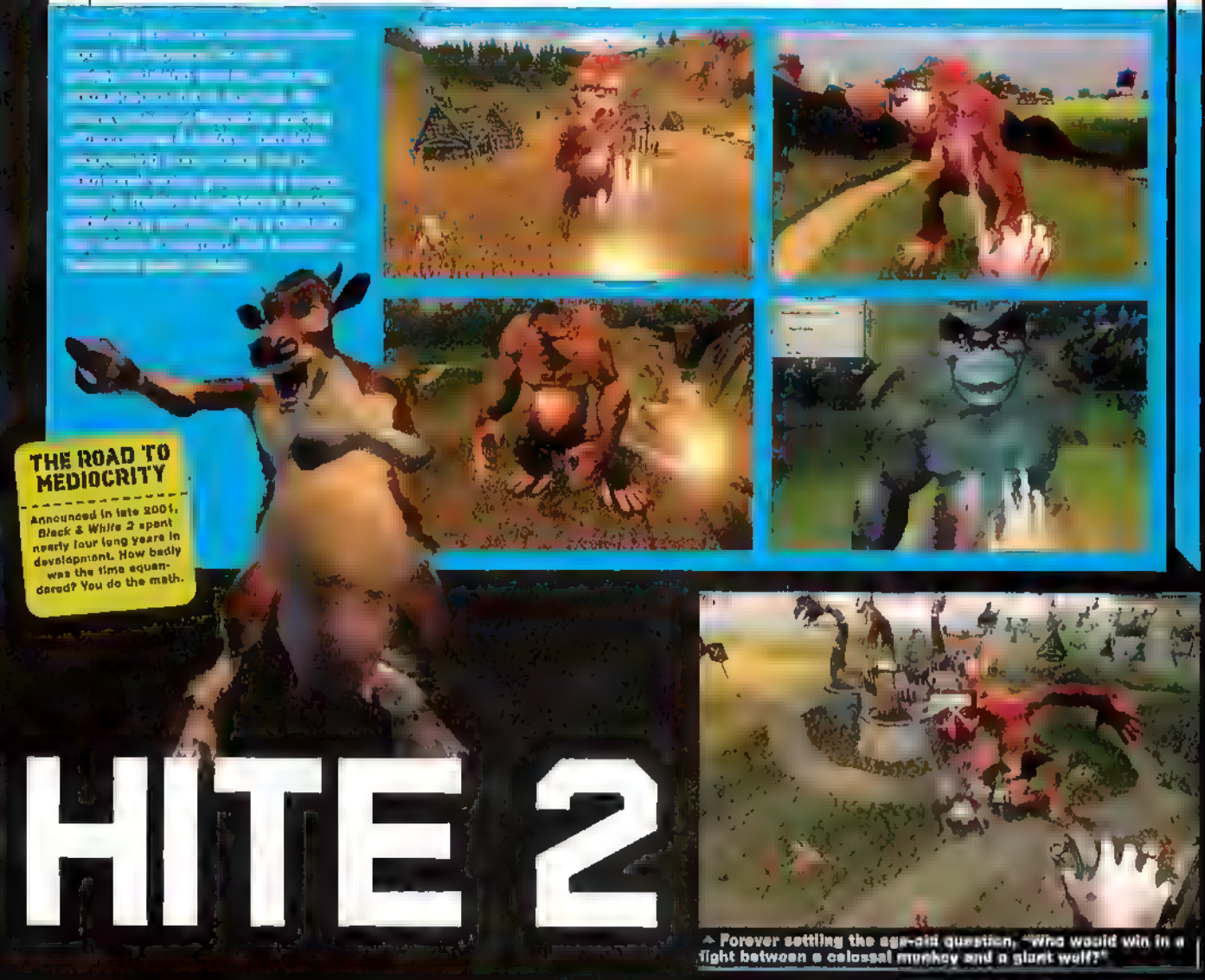
As you work your way across eight island worlds to your ultimate showdown with those bastard Aztecs, you'll have help: a towering animal Púca (essentially your will made flesh). Training and developing your creature forms one of the centerpieces to *B&W2*'s gameplay. Do you evolve a creature that nourishes and entertains your flock, or do you opt for a gigantic war machine? It's your choice.

FALSE MESSIAH

With all its miracles, creatures, devastating wonders (hurricanes, volcanoes, etc.), civilization development, RTS warfare, and more, *B&W2* positions itself as the ultimate God game...yet it fails to truly deliver on any of these fronts. From the macro to the micro, virtually every facet of the game suffers from inherent flaws. Take the largest goal of the game: defeating the Aztecs. As a good deity, you don't defeat them so much as win them over, building your cities to such impressiveness that town after town defects to your side. Success allegedly hinges on creating well-planned and maintained towns, but in truth, as long as your buildings are con-

LIKE THE UNDYING SPIRIT OF ELVIS, YOU ARE EVERYWHERE.

EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES



THE ROAD TO MEDIOCRITY

Announced in late 2001, *Black & White 2* spent nearly four long years in development. How badly was the time squandered? You do the math.

HITE 2

▲ Forever settling the age-old question, "Who would win in a fight between a colossal monkey and a giant wolf?"

nected to roads and you plop down enough of them, you're good. The ultimate reward for your concerted noneffort: huge slabs of utterly dead time.

In truth, the bad guys don't have things any better. As an evil deity, you disregard the pleas of your citizenry for a happier life and raise armies to crush your foes. Again, the promised RTS portion of the game limits you to just three units—swordsmen, archers, and catapults—and success hinges entirely, completely, and wholly on having a bigger army than your enemy. Unfortunately, only men can serve in the army...thus, you often find yourself waiting for your population to replenish itself so you can create more conscripts. In the meantime, you do absolutely nothing. If I'm evil, shouldn't I get to make armies of children or women, or at the very least a warrior society in which the men are automatically trained as fighters? *B&W2* answers firmly: No, now go throw those 100 guys against my 60, win, and wait half an hour to restock for the next battle.

HAMMERS (AND SCREWDRIVERS) OF THE GODS

At least you have better tools than you did in the first game. A clickable interface streamlines things, and the creature-training process is no longer a huge mystery, thanks to thought bubbles that let you know exactly what's on your pet's mind, which helps you play smarter. Providing ying to that yang, the game plays dumber, with a load of detracting A.I. issues—including pathfinding problems and passive enemies who rarely put you in a position of actual danger (a mercy, considering how all the downtime turns every task into a long, forced march to the end). Also, your population ages and dies, yet the game refuses to understand that you actually want 20 farmers farming...forcing you to reallocate all your resource gatherers every half hour or so as each generation dies off.

But disappointment is the litany of *B&W2*. As an evil god, I can build prisons and worse...but why? There's no payoff. Pointless minigames that eschew the game's central morality conflict end up being stupid, insulting, and/or infuriating: Why is God searching an island for seven teeny statues, solving silly puzzles, or catching 25 lambs rocketing out of a sheep's birth canal? *B&W2* abandons almost all its potential depth, opting instead for the tried and stagnant. It's unfortunate, because this game held such promise—a promise that every so often manages to shine through just enough to suggest a better world, one where gods are indeed all-powerful, their creatures fearsome monsters, and the planet little more than clay to mold as they wish. **/Robert Coffey**

Beware false prophets.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★½☆☆

ROME: TOTAL BARBARIAN IN

Rome is burning!

RECOMMENDED: Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

ONE OF THE GREATEST EMPIRES the world has ever known is in decline. The once-great Roman Empire, now divided into two halves, faces danger on all fronts: Germanic barbarians encroach from the north; the Sassanids are on the rise from the Asian steppes; and hordes of nomadic tribes threaten to burn everything in their path. Welcome to *Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion*, which introduces 10 new barbaric factions to the already massive war.

Whether you elect to defend Rome or carve a new empire from its corpse, you get a few new options to toy with here. As in previous chapters of the *Total War* saga, gameplay gets divvied up into strategic and tactical portions: The strategic game involves city building, tax collecting, diplomatic negotiations, and carefully planned army movements, while the tactical game lets you deal with the battles, ambushes, and sieges initiated in the strategic segment.

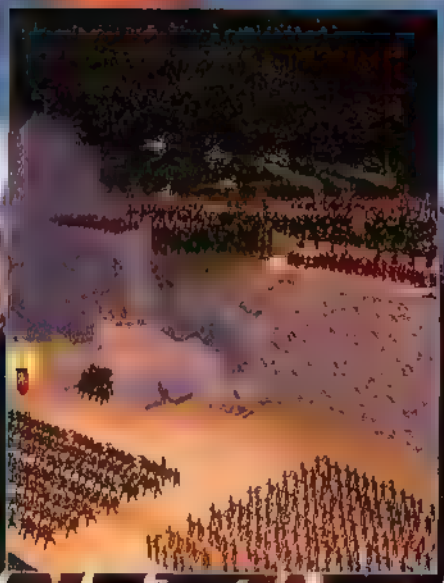
STRATEGIC THINKING

Barbarian Invasion doesn't change the basic structure of the strategic game—though it does make a few tweaks to the details. The most noticeable addition comes in the form of three religions that your generals and cities can follow: Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and paganism. If a city's religion differs from that of your faction leader or the city's ruler, it creates a situation of increased unrest, though populations may be converted via religious buildings and special character abilities. In a few factions, your choice of religion also determines parts of the faction's technology tree.

Religion aside, some barbaric tribes exhibit their own chaotic brand of zealotry. By converting into "hordes," these factions turn their entire population into military units. They cannot hold cities while in this state, but they pay no upkeep costs for military units. Such tribes eventually have to resettle in new homelands, but while hoarding, they can accumulate great wealth as they loot and pillage city upon city.

A few other, more minor additions pepper the strategic mode: Generals are recruited just like regular units, new character abilities and retainers are introduced, and cities of certain empires can rebel, forming new independent factions.

"COSMETIC" MIGHT BE ONE OF THE BETTER WAYS TO DESCRIBE THIS EXPANSION.



WAR—VASION

▲ Night battles don't happen too often.

PRIME TACTICS

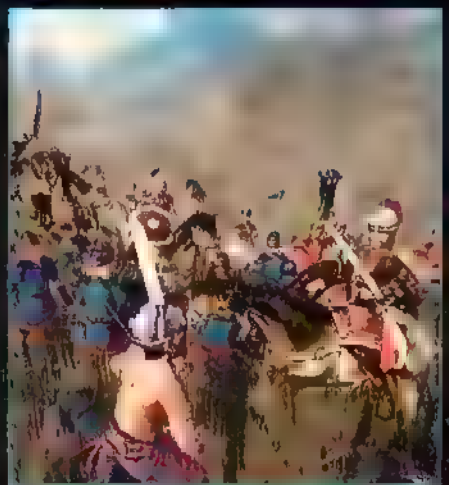
On the flip side, the tactical game's military units show some evolution. Several factions gain more cavalry units and ranged firepower, while mobile infantry formations replace the ponderous phalanxes of Hellenic warfare. Defensive shield walls can be erected for heavy infantry units, and the all-new schiltrons—rings of spearmen, essentially—may be sent forth to receive cavalry charges. A number of light units now enjoy the ability to swim across rivers, thus making it slightly easier to force crossings during river battles. Finally, some commanders gain the ability to launch night attacks, though given the rarity of nighttime fighting, this addition seems primarily cosmetic.

Actually, "cosmetic" might be one of the better ways to describe this expansion. Many of the new factions barely distinguish themselves from one another: Western and Eastern Rome remain virtually identical in terms of military units, barbarian tribes typically sport no more than one or two unique units apiece, and the challenges facing most factions wind up being too similar to stay interesting. Samaritans and Huns, Saxons and Franks—they all have to conquer different objectives, but their units and tech trees are so alike that replaying the campaign feels like déjà vu...and the most interesting factions, like the Slavs and the Romano-British, are unplayable in the single-player scenario mode. Nothing in this expansion stands out as truly exceptional—but if you're a fan of the original *Rome: Total War*, *Barbarian Invasion* gives you a fairly decent bang for your buck./**Di Luo (from 1UP.com)**

Exactly what you expect from a *Total War* expansion.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★½☆



▲ "Hey, baby. You wanna go catch a midnight showing of *Gladiator* after we send these guys packing? Whaddaya say?"

BATTLE OF BRITAIN II: WINGS OF VICTORY

Blood, sweat, and bugs

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, A SMALL number of green Royal Air Force pilots faced an apparently unstoppable German military machine, with the future of the world at stake. Developer Shockwave Productions re-creates that dramatic conflict in *Battle of Britain II: Wings of Victory*, an ambitious but flawed update of 2001's ambitious but flawed *Rowan's Battle of Britain* flight sim.

What you're getting here basically boils down to a super patch/mod of the original—but one that significantly improves upon that game in many ways, including graphics, sounds, flight models, and much more. Thanks to the huge number of aircraft in the sky, *Wings of Victory* does more than any other simulation to make you feel like you're in the middle of a real air war. Fly an intercept mission in some simulations ("cough" *IL-2* "cough") and you take on about a dozen bombers; here, the sky holds scores of them, and just as many fighters—a distinction that goes beyond cosmetic, since realistic tactics become much more diverse when you're faced with a sky so full of aircraft. The campaign also works hard to differentiate *Wings of Victory*, presenting a full-fledged war game in which you control either side's tactics, select targets, assign squadrons, and vie to achieve better success than the historical commanders. You'll want to take advantage of the ability to hop into any cockpit (or gunner's position on German medium bombers) in any mission at any time...although, if you'd rather, you

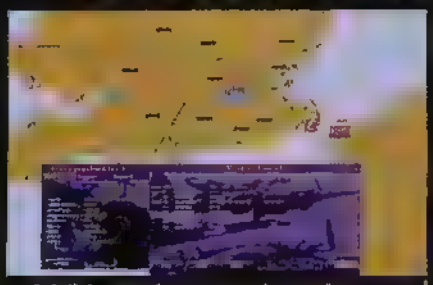
can play through the entire campaign without ever doing so.

A deep, dynamic campaign, skies filled with aircraft, realistic flight models, and the most drama-filled air battle in history—what's not to like? Unfortunately, frequent crashes, poor framerates, and a handful of irritating bugs have already necessitated a pair of postrelease patches to fix the more grievous problems. But if you have a strong interest in the Battle of Britain, or if you're a hardcore flight-simmer, and can handle the bugs, it's worth it. / **Jeff Lackey**

Herein beats the heart of a classic... but casual simmers should wait and see if patches fix the problems.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★☆☆

AN AMBITIOUS BUT FLAWED UPDATE OF 2001'S AMBITIOUS BUT FLAWED *ROWAN'S BATTLE OF BRITAIN*



▲ A full-featured war game forms the foundation of the campaign.

▲ An intercept mission tries to keep the bombs from reaching London.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

TINY TEXAS-BASED WAR-GAME developer Schwerpunkt Games is probably the closest thing to a "digital board game" company you'll ever find. As I write this, the release date for Schwerpunkt's next game—*Anglo-German War*—looms near. Look for a review next issue, and check out Schwerpunkt online at www.ghg.net/schwerpt.

Also, if you're looking for some action in Battlefront.com's *Down in Flames* (check out this month's review for the full scoop—and definitely pick up the full version), feel free to hit me up for a dogfight if you happen to see "Brooski" in the game's main lobby

DIPLOMACY

MAYBE *DIPLOMACY* JUST WASN'T meant for the PC. This marks the third attempt at digitally converting Avalon Hill's classic multiplayer board game, and also probably the worst—if only because by now, the designers should have known better. Besides a game-killing lack of a chat function, *Diplomacy*'s negotiation interface makes it impossible to propose long-term deals, except for the all-encompassing "permanent alliance." The avatar system of negotiation from Hasbro's 1999 version returns here, as odd caricatures of foreign leaders make random, indescribable facial gestures at you before rejecting your proposals. And if that isn't enough to turn you off, *Diplomacy* completely lacks PBEM support, with Internet matches taking place exclusively via Paradox's server. What else is there to say?
/ **Bruce Geryk** *(For more war-gaming geekery, visit Bruce at grognards.1UP.com.)*

Misses the entire point of a classic game.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★☆☆☆☆

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More urban combat, less hedgerows, please.

Giving the Germans a taste of their own 'faust.

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

War zone

IN ESTABLISHING THE *BROTHERS IN ARMS* franchise earlier this year, developer Gearbox Software hit upon a creative stride not often blessed to its ilk. *Brothers In Arms: Earned In Blood* comes only eight months after its predecessor, yet feels like it's undergone years of tweaking. The story once again focuses on a squad of 101st Airborne troops dropped into France during D-Day, led this time by Cpl. Joe "Red" Hartsock. Each squad member carries a distinct name, face, voice, and personality, which infuses the game with an effective *Band of Brothers* vibe. It won't take you long to develop a real bond with your teammates...which is a good thing, as losing even one man has noticeable effects on morale during the heat of battle.

SUPPRESS AND PUNISH

But you can chalk up all the characterization, atmosphere, and out-scene narratives to mere cosmetics; the real richness of the *Blood* experience lies in the ebb and flow of realistic gun battles that force you to employ tactical maneuvers to achieve success. If you played the last game, the drill is already seared into your mind: One of your fire teams suppresses the enemy with volleys of hot lead while the other moves around to flank and kill—all controlled with an elegant, real-time user interface that keeps you hunkered down behind cover with finger firmly on trigger.

Sure enough, the strategic dance remains the same in *Blood*—only now, the enemy is cognizant enough to compensate for your squad movements by relocating to new cover and occasionally catching you off guard with a flanking move. In true sandbox fashion, no two battles play out the same way; in that sense, *Blood* feels more like *Operation Flashpoint* and less like *Medal of Honor*. You also get the sense of a real simulation unfolding beneath all the flash and pyrotechnics, as your A.I. compatriots possess a keen sense of situational awareness. After poking his head out from behind cover, a soldier will wait for a clean opening before actually taking his shot; likewise, a trooper who dives for safety against a hail of MG-42 machine-gun fire might grab his helmet or arch his shoulders back as death whizzes by mere inches away.

THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE

When the bullets go flying and explosive mortar shells punish the earth mere feet away from you, *Blood* looks and sounds unbelievably amazing. Unleashing a spray of Browning assault-rifle fire, hearing the high-caliber roar of your weapon, and watching the stray bullets kick up dust around their intended target just feels good. Happiness here is the crisp crack of a bolt-action sniper rifle: In the wake of every other WWII shooter under the sun, it's no overstatement to say that *Blood* sports some of the best and most visceral audio effects in the business. Crank up the speakers—you need to live this game loud.

In many ways, *Blood* feels like the polished game Gearbox couldn't completely nail last time around. Most of the evolution takes place under the hood; once you dive in and feel all the subtle differences, it's easy to appreciate the added levels of depth and care that obviously went into the game's creation. And, of course, if *Blood* is your first *Brothers In Arms* experience, good luck going back to anything less authentic./**Che Chou (from 1UP.com)**

THE REAL RICHNESS OF THE *BLOOD* EXPERIENCE LIES IN THE EBB AND FLOW OF REALISTIC GUN BATTLES.

Even better than its phenomenal predecessor.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★½

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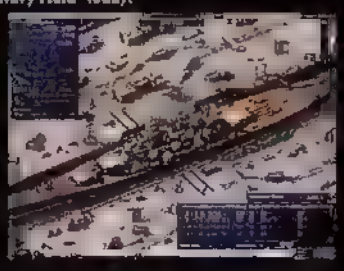
Resurrection of The Steel Fleet: Navy Field

The story of "Navy Field" was based on the WWII which is considered to be one of the most unforgettable and largest wars of the 20th century. As you can tell by the title, "Navy Field" is the story of naval battles during WWII. In "Navy Field", players can take command of historical ships such as the Yamato and Musashi, US New Jersey, US Missouri, U.K Princess of Wales, and the German Bismarck. As well as providing these historically well known ships and images, "Navy Field" also allows the opportunity for players to experience such vivid moments of WWII naval battles in individual battles with up to 128 simultaneous players. If you wish to be a hero; join "Navy Field" today!



www.navyfield.com

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RESURRECTION OF STEEL FLEET

RP

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DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE

Historical reenactment

Lay down on the job: *DOD* caters to campers.

BUGGED OUT

One of the most amusing bugs we've seen so far—illustrated here—finds players spawning sans weapon. *DOD* vets have already affectionately coined this "rollerskating."

BULLETS MEAN BUSINESS. BANG BANG, bye bye. Hitting someone, however, that's another story—one that starts with a fast-moving Fritz, followed by sights that shoot skyward with first pressure on the trigger. After the whacking of bullets chopping off concrete in gray puffs, it ends. He's killed you, and you haven't wounded or even winged him.

Day of Defeat has a bit of an exclusionary "officers club" vibe to it. Old hands go here to wage a revolving war with the same antique weapons, in the same sepia-toned spaces. Some players have been playing and practicing for four years, and since this is the online-only shooter they've been playing and practicing in—only Source-ified—they're ghoulishly good noncoms from the get-go.

With trial and error, it's our world war, too. *DOD*'s one and only mode (lightning war meets capture the flag) focuses on infantry tactics—not tanks, not artillery, not chain of command. Carefully concocted with specific movement in mind, its four meager maps (all refurbished faves) are more chessboard than battlefield. Get that down—tag choke points and windows prone to spit fire—and you'll stop getting the crap kicked out of you. Get some, in other words, and the game gets good.

Take or leave the firecracker recoil, *DOD*'s sights and sounds pop and sizzle. Once, gunfire—both everywhere and nowhere in the original game—chattered in the distance. Now it punctuates periods of silence in cracking bursts. When a German (or GI) opens up, you know where he's at, and when his rounds whistle and howl their way in, you know who he's hunting. Not that you won't see it coming, too.

Chalk it up to Valve's ever-changing Source engine, its ballyhooed physics and new high dynamic range (HDR) lighting. The furniture in *DOD*'s broken houses, the potted plants on their sills, the bicycles abandoned on their stoops, and every picture hanging on every wall—all fodder for cyclones of secondary death. You won't catch the rest until the shredding and blasting stops, but it's there in the form of pulsating sunlight that changes to mimic your adjusting peepers. Better than restored archival footage? If only it weren't so hellishly hard. **/Shawn Elliott**

DAY OF DEFEAT HAS A BIT OF AN EXCLUSIONARY "OFFICERS CLUB" VIBE.

SO LITTLE SO LATE

Love it or hate it, *DOD*'s war is an apparently contradictory compulsion.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★½☆

WHEN ROMAN LEGIONS CONQUERED THE KNOWN WORLD;
DEFEAT MEANT DEATH, AND VICTORY BECAME HISTORY!

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PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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SLITHERINE

System Requirements: Windows 98/ME/2000/XP; Pentium III 1GHz or Athlon 1Ghz; 256 MB RAM; 1G Disk Space; DirectX 9.0c; 64MB Video Card; 1024x768 Monitor

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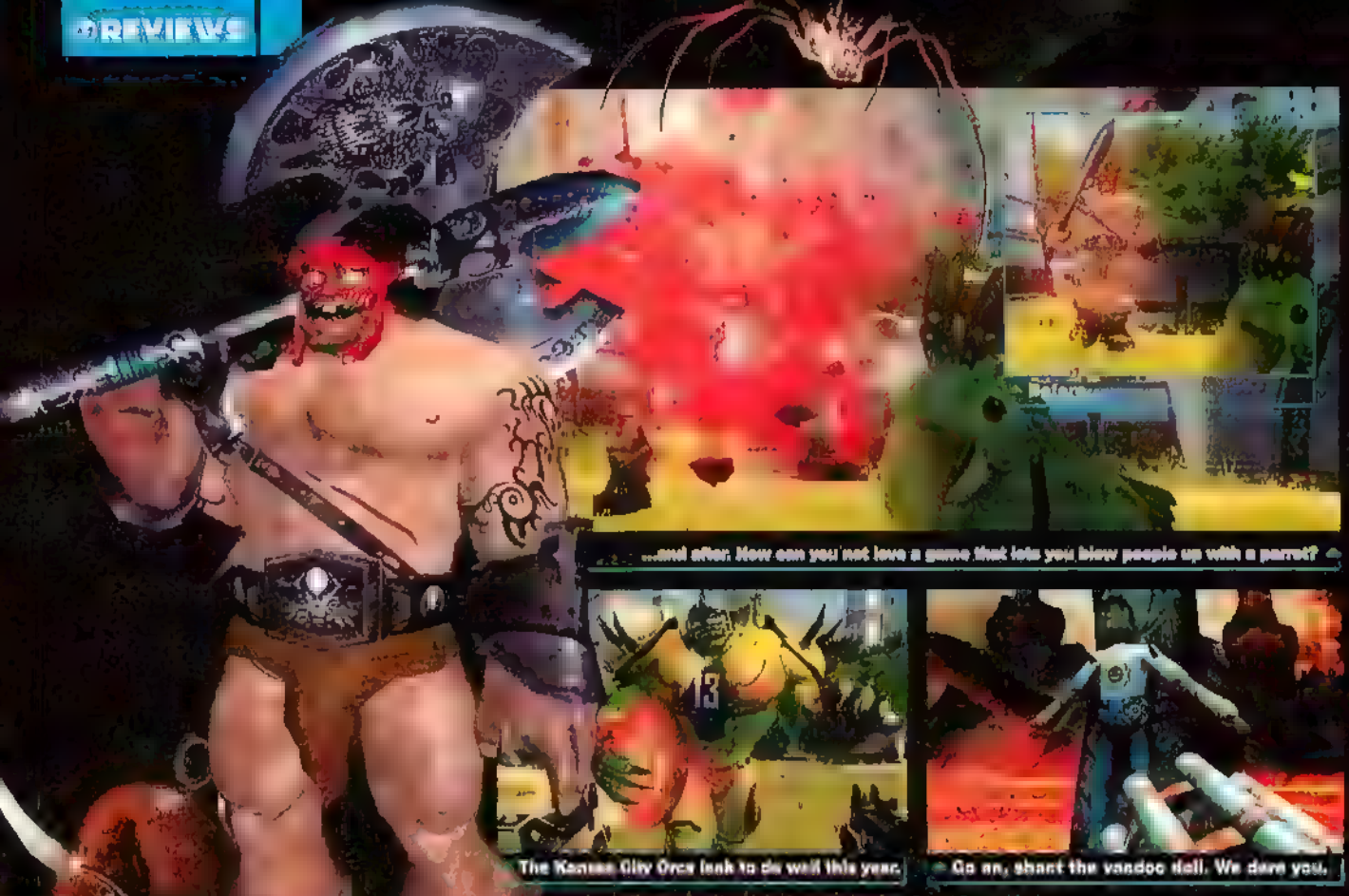


...and after. How can you not love a game that lets you blow people up with a parrot?

The Kansas City Orcs look to do well this year.

Go on, shoot the voodoo doll. We dare you.

SERIOUS

Don't ask, just shoot

DON'T BOTHER LOOKING FOR SOME high-concept, genre-busting masterpiece in *Serious Sam II*. You won't find any fancy bullet time, night vision, friendly squads to control, or lame cut-scenes trying to push character development and storytelling. Here's what you do get, though: dynamite-toting clowns on unicycles, kung fu cadavers, wind-up rhinos, zombie stockbrokers, witches, pit bulls, spandex-clad kamikaze bombers, football-playing orcs, and a giant mutated mechanical lizard that chomps cigars and launches rockets.

THEY CAN'T BE SERIOUS

Croteam never had any pretensions about creating something to compete with *Doom 3* or *Half-Life 2*. Rather than going for shock tactics, *Sam II* happens to be one of the most blatantly strange yet straightforward shooters since...well, the last *Serious Sam* game. Some of the monsters listed above should give you a good initial idea of just how profoundly weird this game gets—it's a far cry from your typical, overly dramatic, kill-all-the-scary-aliens sort of shooter. Think back to games like *Duke Nukem 3D*, with their crass, balls-out protagonists who grab the biggest weapon available, blast through waves of monsters, find the occasional key, flip the occasional switch, and fight ridiculously larger-than-life boss monsters. *Sam II* features more of the same, but developer Croteam proves infinitely more creative than most in regard to how it all gets mashed together. Whether you're gunning at harpies as you surf a gnarly ocean wave or fighting giant martial-arts theme park employees, you're in for one twisted experience.

The same warped approach applies to the vehicles (which include spiked hamster wheels and fire-breathing dinosaurs), hidden details in the environment (tip No. 23: Don't shoot the Serious Sam voodoo doll in the Unreal Wasteland level), and quirky firearms ranging from the conventional (an everyday minigun) to the "what the hell were those Croteam guys smoking?" (a squawking, bomb-toting parrot).

SERIOUS LOOKER

Don't assume that a game which leans so heavily toward the wacky can't have good looks to match. The original *Serious Sam*'s game engine blew minds because of the large number of enemies it could generate onscreen at once—and the brand-new *Sam II* engine adds even more madness to all the colorful worlds waiting to be shredded with shrapnel. If your graphics card has enough kick to it, *Sam II* treats you to gorgeous refractions, incredibly detailed textures, and some great examples of how high dynamic range lighting can make a game shine. Here's just one example of how the *Sam II* engine works when we crank the settings up to "11" on a top-of-the-line graphics card: In a boss battle with giant bumblebee ZumZum, you're staring straight into the sun as you frantically swat at

YOU'RE IN FOR ONE TWISTED EXPERIENCE.

This giant glass distorts your view as you take cover from the giant bumblebee.

Shots from the set of the Will Smith classic, *Wild Wild West*.

Kamikazes: still just as pissed off as ever.

Release the exploding clowns!

SAM II

your insectoid attacker. The blown-out halo glow drowns out the edges of the sunflowers ZumZum circles, while a huge overturned glass teeters in a nearby corner. Images distort and dance around the glass—especially when you duck for cover underneath it. And when your computer screen gets clogged with oncoming enemies, hey—at least you're getting your ass kicked in style.

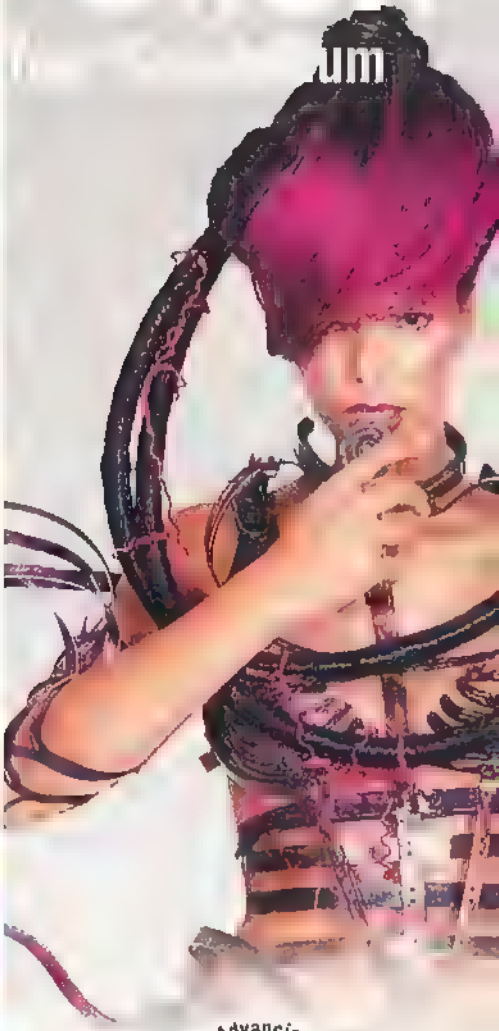
It's hard to take issue with *Sam II*. Sure, the game gets merciless when you ratchet up the difficulty—but how can you fault that? And yes, it sounds like the developers got blitzed one night and recorded all the voices themselves, but that's part of the charm. It all adds up to a crazy *Duke Nukem* meets *Alice in Wonderland* roller-coaster ride—a perfect change of pace from the scads of grim 'n' gritty shooters steeped in WWII warzones and dystopian futures. Just don't take it too seriously, OK? **/Darren Gladstone.**

FINALLY! CO-OP!

Seriously chaotic, and seriously fun.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD | VERDICT ★★★★½

Double-Click



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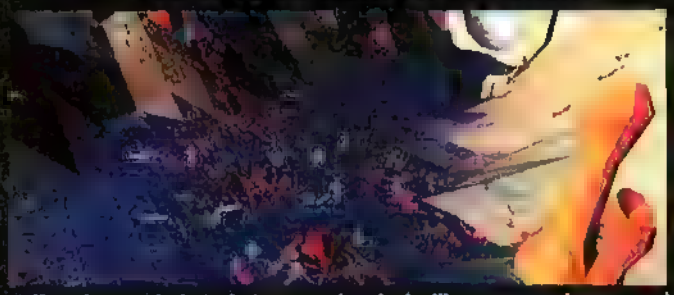
DARWINIA

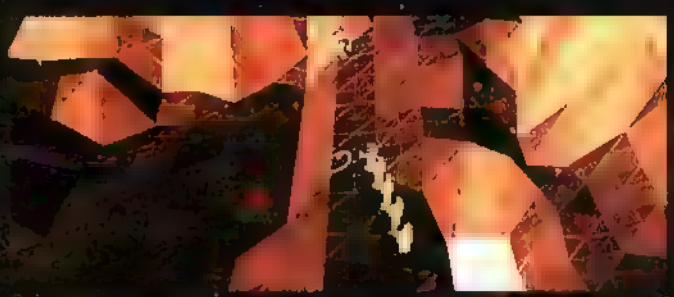
Editor's Choice from Computer Gaming World

You say you want an evolution?

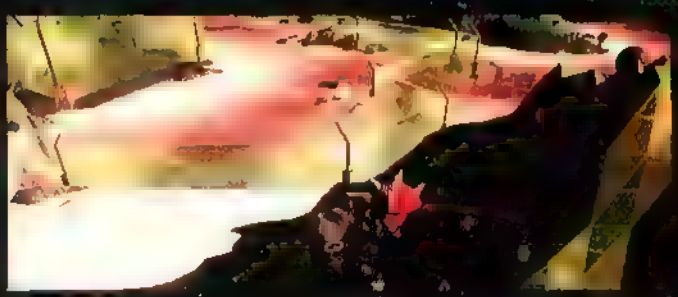


If you're wondering what a game bug looks like...now you know.

The deeper you go, the more logic puzzles you run into.



Your units become increasingly pixelated as they suffer damage.



Enemy generators will sometimes send too many viruses to handle.

$DMD hard drive space RECOMMENDED: None MULTIPLAYER: None

SIMPLISTIC 2D SPRITES DRAG ACROSS a stark and textureless 3D landscape. In any other game, this might be the first sign of disaster—but *Darwinia* isn't any other game. In fact, you've never seen anything quite like this before. It's part *Lemmings*, part *Cannon Fodder*, part *Tron*...and a whole hell of a lot of fun.

Darwinia's overriding theme is its simple elegance; from bare-but-beautiful graphics to quirky gameplay mechanics, the unique design just clicks. The story focuses on an Apple II–era VR theme park where little green digital denizens known as Darwinians, evolved over thousands of generations, are threatened by a malicious virus. The good doctor who designed the park has managed to quarantine the outbreak, but you've unwittingly stumbled into the infected network. Your mission: Help bring the system back online, raise a virtual army, and stop the virus before it spreads even further.

GHOSTS IN THE SHELL

Your crusade against the digital infection takes the form of a brilliant blend of strategy, action, and situational puzzle solving. The unassuming Darwinians are, in a nutshell, lemmings. You have no direct control over their movements, though you do possess the means to herd them away from dangerous areas, thanks to a central command hub called the Task Manager.

Holding the Alt key brings up the Task Manager interface, which allows you to execute various helpful programs. For example, drawing a specific pattern with your mouse calls forth an engineer to assist in reclaiming corrupted trunk ports and communication dishes. You also have access to theme park mastermind Dr. Sepulveda, whose research continues to aid you throughout the game in the form of weapon upgrades and engineering improvements. Unlike most strategy games, *Darwinia* offers no conventional resources to hoard; rather, you have to juggle helper programs to guide the Darwinians to safety. Forget about controlling hundreds of units—you're lucky to get six, as the Task Manager requires upgrades in order to run more than three programs at once. These squads constitute your front line against viral threats, turning the game into a frantic shooting gallery as you use the mouse to aim and fire at the little buggers.

FEVER PITCH

Later on, the action escalates to chaotic levels as you face hundreds of swarming enemies. This leads to two gripes: Alt-Tabbing lets you quickly cycle between active programs, but the camera won't automatically jump to your newly selected unit, and combing the huge virtual cyberscape for it can be a frustrating endeavor. Squad A.I. also comes up short in the "I" department, especially in terms of navigation. Your programs tend to opt for direct routes...even if it means crossing a lethal patch of water. Being able to set waypoints for your squads would have made life so much easier.

These nitpicks don't keep *Darwinia* from being great for the 10 or so hours that it lasts. If anything, it reminds us that ridiculous production values and high-powered rigs aren't always necessary to make a game that's just plain *fun*.

/Darren Gladstone

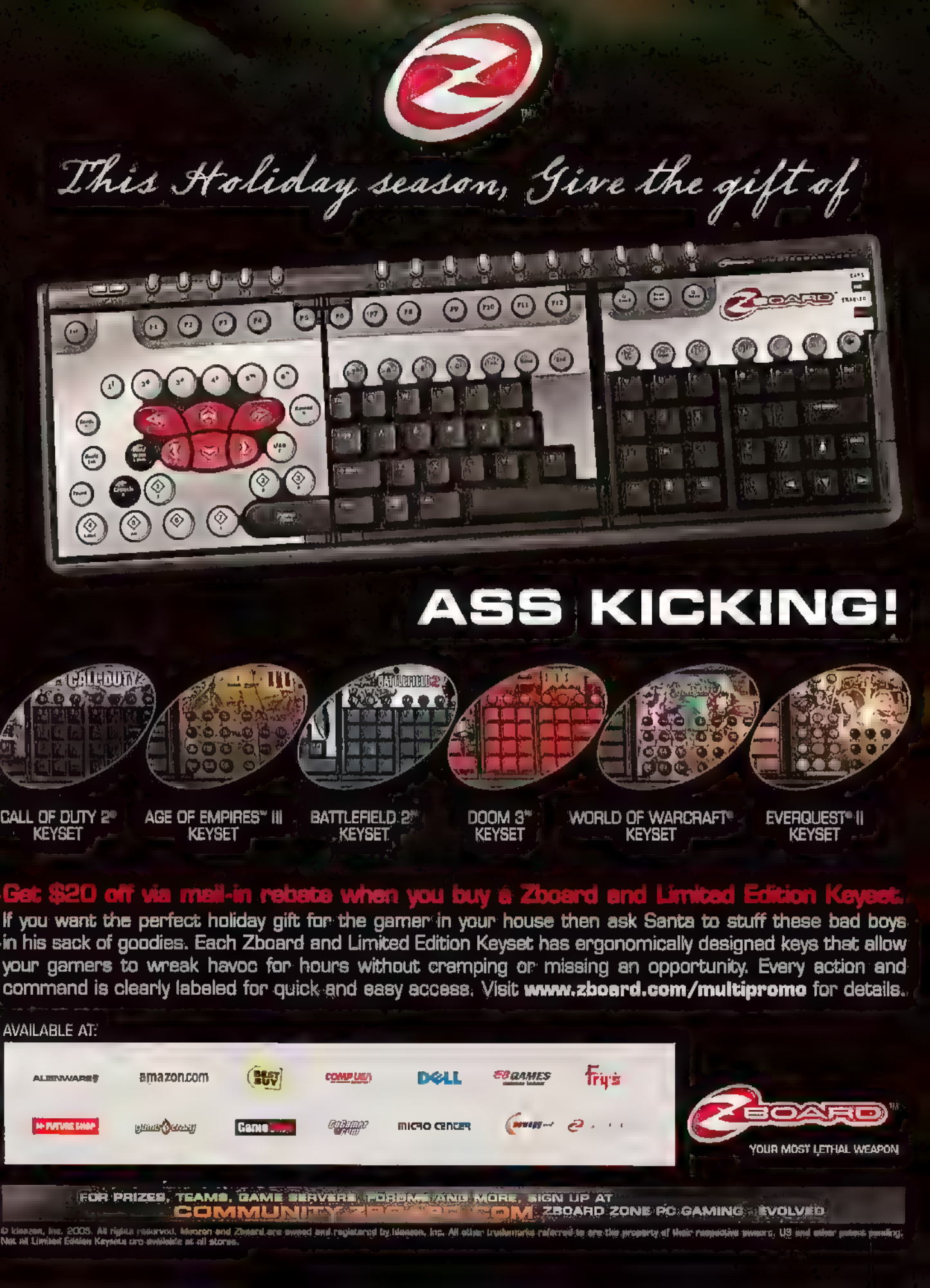
THE BEST GAME YOU'LL NEVER FIND

The gaming industry churns out sequels on an endless conveyor belt, choking up retail shelf space with countless clones—which means that means truly original titles like *Darwinia* rarely stand a chance when publishers start looking at the bottom line. Even with developer Introversion Software's track record—namely the award-winning *Uplink: Hacker Elite*—it's had a tough (and thus far impossible) time finding a Stateside publisher for *Darwinia*. The good news: You can easily purchase and download this gem at www.darwinia.co.uk for a mere $30.

Better than most big-budget games.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

THE UNASSUMING DARWINIANS ARE, IN A NUTSHELL, LEMMINGS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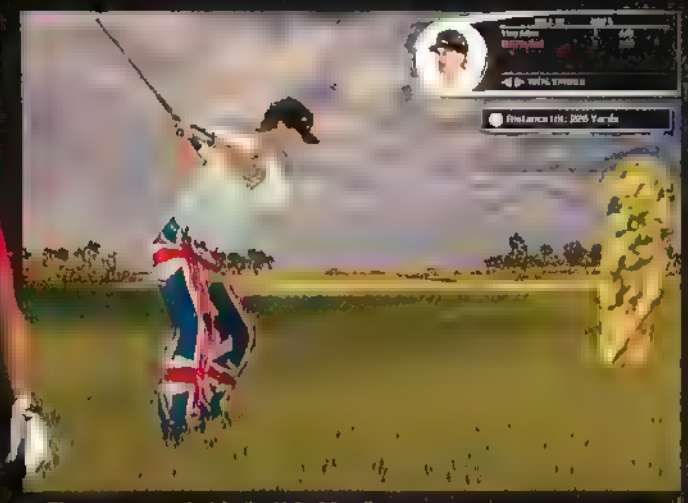

The oxymoron that is "golf fashion."

Drive for show, but putt for dough.

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06

Be the ball

RECOMMENDED: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

AFTER A FEW ROUNDS OF *TIGER WOODS PGA Tour 06*, the unthinkable happened—I actually wanted to play real golf. After a few more rounds at a higher difficulty level, the thinkable happened—I changed my mind. Both of these reactions underscore just how great a game *Tiger* is: It's incredibly approachable and appealing to novices yet capable of meeting the most stringent demands of hardcore golf simmers. Sometime deep in the game, after I'd earned my PGA Tour card, I changed my mind again...but conditionally: I'll never again play that hellish first hole of the Black Course at Bethpage. Ever.

NO SLOUCH

Tiger 06 plays a lot like last year's *Tiger*—not a bad thing, considering it was CGW's 2004 Sports Game of the Year. The TrueSwing mouse interface is still the best way ever to hit a digital golf ball, the graphics remain just as sharp (if not sharper), and the gameplay beautifully re-creates the good walk spoiled. But you do get some changes, too, such as gamepad support for players who are too ignorant or unsteady of hand to embrace TrueSwing. *Tiger 06* also introduces the new rivals mode, which throws last year's legends mode into a time machine, arming you with outdated equipment and pitting you against golfers from bygone eras. I never warmed up to legends' jokier characters, so I figured rivals would be better...up until I teed off against an actor in Shakespearean dress. Oh well. At least the rivals-mode period pieces provide some entertainment—the ultimate challenge being to supplant Tiger himself as the Lord King God of Golf.

A CINDERELLA STORY, OUT OF NOWHERE

The rivals challenges also provide a steady source of experience for developing your own character in career mode, where the true heart of the game lies. This year's career mode presents a tougher yet more rewarding series of career hurdles that lead you to the PGA Tour. Your golfer levels up by competing in increasingly difficult end-of-year tournaments—including the excruciating six-round Q-School that stands between you and your PGA Tour card. This long, difficult slog infuses the big contests with extra drama and really makes you feel like you've earned your way to the top. Once on the tour, you get some pretty lofty goals...like qualifying for the national team and achieving that coveted No. 1 ranking.

Tiger 06 is a hardcore character-building RPG wrapped up in a sports game, letting you craft your own story of spectacular success or crushing failure. If a nongolfer like me can love it, pretty much anyone can. Indeed, the ultimate *Tiger* challenge might be tearing yourself away from the game once you've started playing. / **Robert Coffey**

WANNA MAKE 14 BUCKS THE HARD WAY?

Most of the matches in *Tiger 06*

Birdies: Shoot a birdie (one under par) or better on a hole.

The player whose tee shot is closest to the pin on par-3 holes wins.

It's in the hole.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

:THE AFTERMATH

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TEEN T Blood Mild Violence ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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GS SOFTWARE

Windows 98/ME/2000/XP; Pentium III 700 MHz, (Pentium IV 1,5 GHz or above recommended); 32 MB Videocard (64 MB videocard recommended); 256 MB RAM (512 MB recommended); CD-ROM 4x; 2 GB Hard Drive space; sound card; keyboard; mouse.

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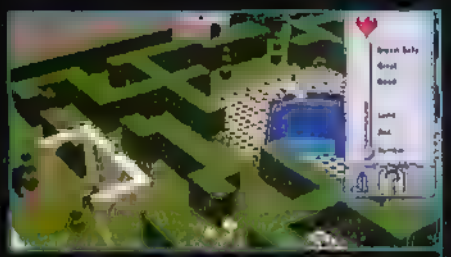
THE SIMS 2: NIGHTLIFE

A sure cure for cabin fever

▲ Dream dates prompt your companion to bring you bouquets, so you can eventually construct a nice rose border around your house.

▲ *Nightlife* adds plenty of vice to your Sims' lives, such as poker and drinking at Lucky Shack Cards.



▲ Wants that are harder to achieve, such as woohoo with five Sims, will better increase your Aspiration meter.

▲ Sims karaoke isn't easy on the ears, but it's offered at several venues.

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON WHY *Sims* games appeal to people, even when mundane tasks like showering and going to the bathroom take center stage. Satisfying those needs has never been the fun part—what's fun is acquiring cool toys like hot tubs. *Nightlife*, EA's latest *Sims 2* expansion, wisely focuses on humankind's hedonistic tendencies, with less emphasis on acquisition and more on enjoying life outside the house.

THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER

Friends are important to have in *Sims* games, but it gets tiresome hosting house parties all the time—not to mention looking at the same place day after day. *Nightlife* addresses the issue by letting you go on dates and group outings. This ain't New York City, but with museums, restaurants, nightclubs, bowling alleys, parks, boutiques, and spas, *Nightlife*'s downtown provides plenty of ways to stave off boredom while improving your relationships. Here, you enjoy the accoutrements and ambiance of places you could never dream of affording on your Sims' paltry salaries. Head to R.U.R.E. for a dip in the hot tub, go for a spin in the Electro Dance Sphere, or try Lucky Shack Cards for karaoke and poker. One of the best new items: the photo booth, which not only allows you to take photos commemorating your dates, but also serves as a convenient place for some quality (ahem) woohoo. You can also buy your own car, park outside a venue, and woohoo there.

Woohoo is just one way to achieve popularity, of course, but dating is key in *Nightlife*. If you have an especially successful dream date, your companion may show up the next day to reward you with a 12th-century Song dynasty sculpted vase or a Groove Layer 9000 professional DJ booth. Performing well during a date is probably a bit too easy because you can always ask your date what he or she wants. You can also check turn-offs and turn-ons, but these can be ignored with little effect; if the Sim didn't like you enough, he wouldn't have agreed to go on the date in the first place. Of course, dating also has its hazards: If your Sim has slutty tendencies, she'll definitely get caught sooner or later by a jealous lover, forcing her to suffer tipped-over garbage cans, public fistfights between her lovers, or worse.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

But *Nightlife* isn't all about dates and outings—ultimately, you want to work toward your Sims' aspirations. With another nod to hedonism, *Nightlife* adds a Pleasure aspiration to the mix. You also get a new Wants and Fears panel, listing actions that will ratchet up or deplete your Aspiration meter. This addition works well, bringing concrete goals to gameplay that might otherwise seem too open-ended.

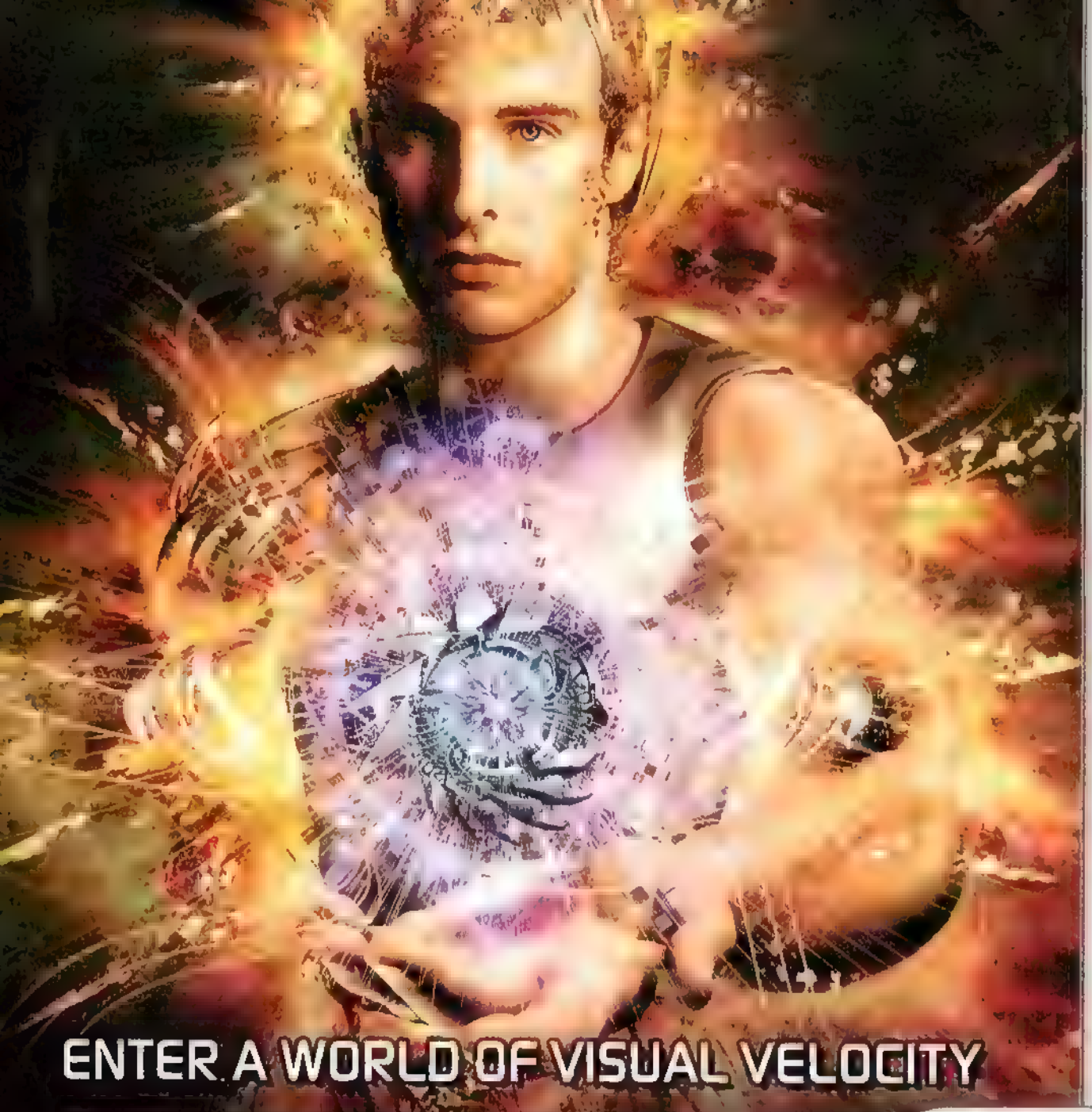
None of this stuff revolutionizes the gameplay model, but it does twist things up enough to keep fans interested. If you're going stir-crazy with *The Sims 2*, then *Nightlife* just might be the perfect cure. /**Carrie Shepherd**

MORALSP CHECK.

Finally, a *Sims* expansion that caters to hedonism.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★☆

WOOHOO IS JUST ONE WAY TO ACHIEVE POPULARITY, OF COURSE.



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Grumpy Phoney Bone ponders his next move.

BONE: OUT FROM BONEVILLE

Stupid, stupid rat creatures!

Fone Bone meets Ted the Bug in a scene right out of the comic book.

YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A NUDE, chalk-white little shorty with a huge nose, right? Well, here's your chance. Based on Jeff Smith's comic book, *Bone* tells the story of three little creatures called Bones (Fone, Phoney, and Smiley), who are run out of their home, Boneville, and end up lost in a strange valley. They get mixed up in a big adventure involving a beautiful princess, dragons, and some stupid, stupid rat creatures.

The story unfolds through a series of minigames and puzzles. For example, at one point you're asked to chop wood...but you have to figure out how to do it after termites destroy your ax. Another involves trying to escape the rat creatures by outwitting them. *Bone* has one frustrating puzzle in which you must run from the rat creatures. If you get trampled, the game boots you back to the beginning of the chase, and sometimes even crashes the game. Stupid, stupid rat creatures!

Still, comic sticklers should note that *Bone* does an extremely good job of incorporating scenes from the comic, sometimes even using the same dialogue. My dad and I read the *Bone* comics out loud together (squeaky voices and all), so the speech here sounds a little different than what I imagined, but it's still good—particularly Phoney Bone's gravelly drawl and the possum babies' high-pitched chatter.

The downside: *Bone* lasts for only about five hours and ends right where the first part of the comic does. To get the full story, you'll have to wait for the next chapters to come out (which cost $20 each, from www.telltalegames.com), so you might want to wait and play it all at once. This first *Bone* chapter isn't for serious gamers but it's still fun for all ages—and great for fans of the comics.

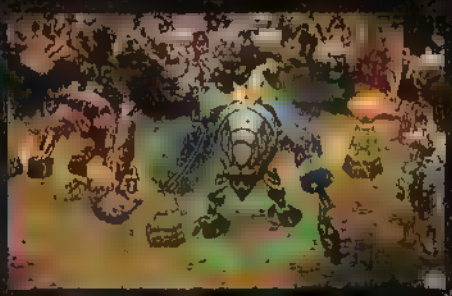
/Sarah Jassier Green, 6th grade

A faithful, fun retelling of the comic book—just too short.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½☆

DRAGONSHARD

You got strategy in my role-playing game!



Warforged soldiers grind enemy units into scrap metal.

The Order of the Flame's ultimate unit. Not for use near flammable objects.

DRAGONSHARD BRINGS THE TABLETOP *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG into the strategy realm—something unheard of since Interplay's *Blood & Magic* back in 1996. The game's story takes place in *D&D*'s burgeoning Eberron setting and revolves around the titular dragonshard, a massive, powerful crystal coveted by the world's three major players: the obligatory do-gooding Order of the Flame, reptilian lizardfolk, and crafty, subterranean umbragen. The tale unfolds across two seven-level campaigns, which star the Order and the lizardfolk, respectively. The umbragen appear exclusively in skirmish and multiplayer modes, but given the existing campaigns' brevity (14 levels in total), you're left feeling that a third campaign just sort of didn't make it in.

Two things stand out across *Dragonshard*'s short campaigns. The first: a well-crafted economic system that eliminates formulaic harvesting routines. Aside from the all-important dragonshard fragments (which rain down in violent hailstorms), you automatically accrue gold in the form of tax funds—though to acquire any serious wealth, you're forced underground, which brings out *Dragonshard*'s second major strength. The ancient RPG tradition of exploring dungeons, killing monsters, gathering loot, and earning experience melds nicely with the RTS gameplay; it makes for some synergistic genre-bending, as the cash you collect during dungeon crawls facilitates bigger cities and more powerful armies, staffed by many of *D&D*'s signature archetypes.

When you finally march said armies into battle against the CPU, you start to get a taste of the game's vexing A.I. During one level, your opponent might play as an aggressive warmonger, besieging you from all sides with feints and flanking maneuvers...while in the next, it buys a lifetime short-bus pass by constructing a base and no fighting units. Occasionally frustrating, yes—but *Dragonshard*'s unconventional multi-genre style usually manages to outshine these deficiencies. The end result may not be groundbreaking, but you'll certainly have fun. And that's the most important thing.

/Stephen Gehringer

A fun mix of strategy and role-playing, minus all the pencils and dice.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½☆

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THE NEXT LEVEL

CGW's guide to the latest must-have patches and user mods

DYSTOPIA

Thru inside and out: Hack the matrix to help allies on the outside.

CYBERPUNK, WE'VE DONE DITTO for cyberspace. But waging war in actual and virtual worlds at once? Not so much. The *Half-Life 2*–based *Dystopia* manages to mix the two and comes off as more than another by-the-numbers *Counter Strike* clone. Codependence is the premise here. More so than what is seen between the squads of mercenaries and corporate security forces. More so than their monotonous, platinum-plated complexes and laser-lined computer grids.

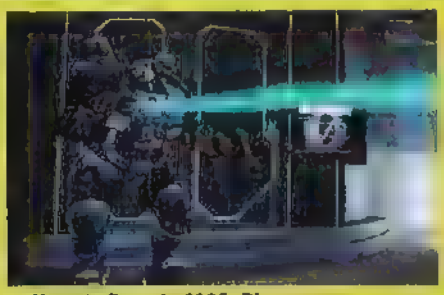
Armed and armored accordingly, *Dystopia*'s character classes come in small, medium, and supersized models. Big is slow and small is swift—but those with lighter loads also pack more performance enhancing implants. Cloaking chips, for instance, allow scouts to slip past sentry turrets and stick beefier opponents in the back; mediplants turn troopers into mobile first-aid stations; and cyberdecks let soldiers' ghosts go from shell to machine. Hacking here is symbiotic: Only plugged-in players can open routes to real-world objectives, and only their allies in the here and now can protect them while their minds are in the matrix. In ideal scenarios (i.e., playing on a server full of friends), matches are all about cooperative clockwork—talking through plans and putting 'em into motion. At other times, *Dystopia* is too intricate; instead of tick-tock efficiency, you get two hands spinning in wrong directions as unprotected hackers hold up the program in cyberspace.

It might seem peculiar that something so circuit-board complex should come free from fans. Or maybe not—modder moxie runs high in the *Half-Life* community, and with good reason. If Team Dystopia can get its game's ho-hum combat up to speed with its high concept, it ought to win its way into Valve's bona fide network like *Day of Defeat*'s and *Team Fortress*' developers did before it. **/Shawn Elliott**

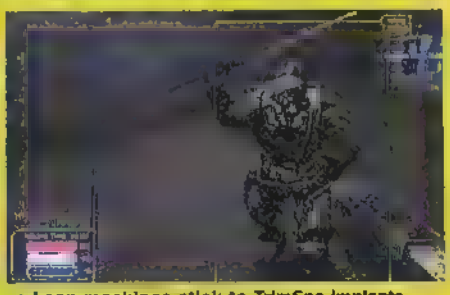
High concept; higgly-piggly combat.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½

Cyber chubs waddle off to war.



Humpty Dumpty 2035. Discuss.



Lean machines stick to TrimSpa implants.

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REWIND

What should you play today? Names in blue indicate Editors' Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Act of War: Direct Action	Jun 05	★★★★½
Advent Rising	Nov 05	★★★½
Aerial Strike	Jun 05	★★½
Alexander	Mar 05	★★
Area 51	Sep 05	★★★½
Armies of Exigo	Mar 05	★★★★
The Bard's Tale	Oct 05	★★★★½
Baseball Mogul 2006	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Battlefield 2	Sep 05	★★★★★
Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder	Feb 05	★★★½
BloodRayne 2	Oct 05	★★★½
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	Jun 05	★★★★½
Close Combat: First to Fight	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	Mar 05	★★★★★
Codename: Panzers—Phase Two	Nov 05	★★★½
Combat: Task Force 121	Jul/Aug 05	★½
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Crown of Glory: Europe in the Age of Napoleon	Oct 05	★★½
Dangerous Waters	Jun 05	★★★★
Domination	Jun 05	★★★½
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Dragoon	Apr 05	★★½
DRIV3R	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Dungeon Lords	Sep 05	½
Dungeon Siege II	Nov 05	★★★½
Elite Warriors: Vietnam	Jul/Aug 05	★½
Empire Earth II	Jun 05	★★★★½
ER	Oct 05	★★½
Fable: The Lost Chapters	Nov 05	★★★½
Fantastic 4	Sep 05	★★½
Fate	Sep 05	★★★★½
FlatOut	Sep 05	★★★★½
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone	Apr 05	★★★½
Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich	May 05	★★★★★
Gary Grigsby's World at War	Jun 05	★★★½
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Sep 05	★★★★½
GTR FIA Racing	Oct 05	★★★½
Guild Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Half-Life 2	Feb 05	★★★★½
Hearts of Iron II	Apr 05	★★½
Heritage of Kings: The Settlers	Jun 05	½
Imperial Glory	Sep 05	★★½
Joint Ops: Escalation	Feb 05	★★★★½
Knights of Honor	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Legacy: Dark Shadows	Apr 05	½
Lego Star Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Lost Admiral Returns	May 05	★★★½
Madden NFL 06	Nov 05	★★★★
The Matrix Online	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Medieval Lords	Apr 05	★★½
MVP Baseball 2005	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★½
NASCAR SimRacing	May 05	★★★★
NBA Live 2005	Mar 05	★★★½
Need for Speed Underground 2	Apr 05	★★★★½
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	Mar 05	★★★★½
Obscure	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Painkiller: Battle out of Hell	Feb 05	★★★½
Pariah	Sep 05	★★½
Playboy: The Mansion	Apr 05	★½
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	Mar 05	★★★★
Project: Snowblind	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Psychonauts	Jun 05	★★★★½
Psychotoxic	Jul/Aug 05	½
Raging Tiger	Apr 05	★½
Restricted Area	Oct 05	½
Return to Mysterious Island	Apr 05	★★★★
RYL: Path of the Emperor	Oct 05	½
Second Sight	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Sentinel: Descendants in Time	Apr 05	★★★½
Silent Hunter III	Jun 05	★★★★★
The Sims 2: University	May 05	★★★★½
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	Jun 05	★★★★★
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	Apr 05	★★★★½
Star Wars Republic Commando	May 05	★★★★
Stronghold 2	Sep 05	★½
Supremacy	Jul/Aug 05	★½
SWAT 4	Jun 05	★★★★★
T-72: Balkans on Fire!	Oct 05	★★★½
Time of Defiance	Apr 05	★★★½
Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great	Apr 05	★★★½
Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar	Sep 05	★★★½
TrackMania Sunrise	Sep 05	★★★½
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	Feb 05	★★★★½
Vendetta Online	May 05	★½
WinSPMBT	Nov 05	★★★½
World Championship Tennis	Jul/Aug 05	½
World Soccer Winning Eleven 8 International	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★½
Zoo Tycoon 2	Feb 05	★★½

▲ Fable: The Lost Chapters

▲ Advent Rising

▲ Madden NFL 06

This month we tapped our pals at ExtremeTech to help us tear through the coolest new gear. Besides dissecting X-Fi, we deliver the definitive word on ATI's long-awaited X1000 3D cards. Should Nvidia be nervous? Find out on page 116.

Creative Labs X-Fi ELITE Pro

THE LAST AUDIOCARD?

Our experts sound off after getting an earful of Creative Labs' high-end X-Fi boards

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, THE ORIGINAL ISA-based Sound Blaster card arrived on the scene. That card sported an 11-voice FM synthesizer and 8-bit monophonic digital audio capability. Since then, Creative has weathered the competition to dominate the market for PC add-on soundcards. Now that dominance is over an ever-shrinking market.

As CPUs have become more powerful, the capabilities of host-based audio have improved. While it's true that a good PCI soundcard enables extra audio effects and lower CPU utilization in games, that's not a great benefit to nongamers. On top of that, motherboard and chipset manufacturers are rapidly adding features to their products, including Dolby Master Certification, clean multichannel audio, and even 3D positional sound. The final straw may be Microsoft's move away from hardware-accelerated audio in its upcoming Windows Vista operating system.

This is where X-Fi and the two high-end SKUs, the Fata1ty FPS and Elite Pro, come in. Both have 64MB of onboard "X-RAM." This memory is used to cache audio samples, whether they're used in games or for content creation (e.g., synth samples). Only one game so far—EA's *Battlefield 2*—has explicit support for the X-Fi onboard RAM, even promising in-game performance boosts.

All four cards appear identical from the rear, with three output jacks for analog speakers and one multipurpose jack that can be retasked as a digital audio input, microphone input, or standard analog line-in. In the case of the Fata1ty FPS and Elite Pro kits reviewed here, you also get a control bay. Fatal1ty's branded board has an internal front panel while the Elite Pro has an external breakout solution. Both provide everything from optical I/O to additional headphone and mic inputs with manual volume control.

Creative is currently using a Cirrus Logic CS4382 8-channel DAC (digital/analog converter) for three of the four cards, which the company has used in the past in the Audigy 2 ZS line. The Elite Pro uses four Cirrus Logic CS4398 stereo DACs, which offer a higher signal-to-noise ratio than the DS4382. Interestingly, these DACs support DSD (direct stream digital) input, which implies that Creative could add support for SACD (Super Audio CDs, high-def 5.1 audio discs) down the road. The one thing we miss is the FireWire port that shipped with most versions of the Audigy 2 series, but since the majority of motherboards and systems have FireWire onboard, this isn't a major omission.

THE REAL-WORLD TESTS

Enough talk; it's time to listen. For subjective testing, we used both speakers (Creative's own Gigaworks 7.1 speaker set for multichannel speaker testing and a pair of Klipsch ProMedia 2.1 speakers for stereo testing) and headphones (Sennheiser HD580 and ▸

INSIDE

120 REVIEW
Radeon X1000 3D cards
ATI finally fights back against the 7800 GTX.

114 REVIEW
Bargain-Basement CPU
AMD delivers cheap dual-core technology.

X-FI KITS AS A GLANCE What exactly are the differences between all these cards?

	SOUND BLASTER X-FI XTREME MUSIC	SOUND BLASTER X-FI PLATINUM	SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATAL1TY FPS	SOUND BLASTER X-FI ELITE PRO
HARDWARE INCLUDES	X-Fi Card	X-Fi Card, 5.25-inch front panel bay	X-Fi card, 5.25-inch front panel bay	X-Fi card, external control bay
ONBOARD RAM	None	None	64MB	64MB
SOFTWARE BUNDLE	Base (see below)	Base (see below) plus Vienna SoundFont Studio, Console Launcher, Volume Panel, WaveStudio, Creative Media Toolbox, Creative Diagnostics	Base (see below) plus Vienna SoundFont Studio, Console Launcher, Volume Panel, WaveStudio, Creative Media Toolbox, Creative Diagnostics	Base (see below), plus Vienna SoundFont Studio, Console Launcher, Volume Panel, WaveStudio, Creative Media Toolbox, Creative Diagnostics, CuBase LE, WaveLab Lite, Amplitube SE
REMOTE CONTROL	No	No	Yes	Yes
PRICE	$130	$200	$280	$400

BASE SOFTWARE INCLUDES: *Doom 3* Sound Blaster EAX patch, Entertainment Mode, Audio Creation Mode, Game Mode, Mode Switcher, Audio Console, Creative MediaSource, Creative MediaSource DVD-Audio Player, DTS Neo:6 Settings, Karaoke Player, Entertainment Center, Smart Recorder, SoundFont Bank Manager, Speaker Connection Wizard, THX Setup Console

› Grado SR125 stereo headphones). Next, we played a variety of music, DVD videos, and games, in addition to *Battlefield 2*.

First, Creative did a good job of tightening up the software UI and controls. They're a lot more attractive and easy to use. This is probably the first time we'll actually install and use something beyond the drivers. And we've got to say, the Elite Pro breakout box works great. Pressing in the buttons to enable or disable features and tweak them on the fly without having to look at a control panel or leave the game is a nice feature. Plus, you can set the headphone jack to auto-mute speakers or not, just like Audigy 2 breakout boxes have done in the past.

So far the only PC game with an X-Fi mode is *Battlefield 2*, and yes, it does make a difference. It's not an "oh my god!" difference over the Audigy 2, as the game's creators already spent a good deal of effort on audio in *BF2*. But it definitely sounds better. You hear a lot more of what's going on in the game, and the sounds seem clearer and more detailed.

The SVM (smart volume management) mode is really well implemented. It's basically auto-volume-leveling, which isn't anything new. But the X-Fi software and hardware do a great job of intelligently bringing up soft sounds when they're the only thing going on and limiting overpowering sounds from drowning out more subtle noises. But loud stuff still sounds loud.

A great test is *World of WarCraft*. That game has tremendous audio with a very rich soundscape. Every little fire crackles, and every character's footfalls sound appropriate to the surface you're walking on—whether you're crunching in the snow or clopping on a road. Then there is the musical score and all the normal combat noises. The SVM does a wonderful job of making all those subtle sounds much louder when there's nothing much else happening, but not blowing your ears out when you get in combat. The *F.E.A.R.* demo also sounds amazing. Things like your heavy breathing in those quiet, tense moments really come alive. In a way, the volume balancing is an unexpected favorite feature.

The 3D virtualization (CMSS) is probably some of the best we've heard. For real-time 3D virtualization, it's nice. It still doesn't sound like true 5.1 when using headphones, but it does open up the soundscape quite a bit. Most important, it doesn't load up your music or game sounds with distortion, which is the problem we have with every single other real-time virtualization we've ever tried. This is pretty much distortion free, and it's the first time we have left 3D virtualization enabled all the time.

On the other hand, the 24-bit Crystalizer function is hit or miss. It almost never makes something sound worse, but it does tend to make a few instruments stand out more—and not always when you want them to. It's a feature we could take or leave. It makes poorly compressed MP3s (128k) and the like sound better, but we wouldn't recommend it for music encoded at 256k or better. The surround-sound implementation over headphones really needs to be heard to be believed. It's not perfect, by any means, but it's impressive. You definitely get a sense of distance with the right and left channels (both front and rear). However, the center channels tend to give you that "car audio" effect, in which the source is only about two feet away. But two feet in front is a big improvement over sounding like there's a jam session in the middle of your skull.

SO SHOULD YOU BUY AN X-FI?

If you're an Audigy 2 card-carrying casual gamer, the answer is no. Serious audio buffs, though, need to give some thought to it. The 127-voice capability is pretty amazing, and you'll have a great time fooling around with all the audio effects.

Now, when it comes to the Elite Pro ($400) and the Fatal1ty FPS ($280), both are good, but those price tags are hard to swallow. Regardless of how many high-end DACs and inputs Creative gives us, adding 64MB of RAM and a fancy, glowing logo might not justify the price increase to a gamer. As more games support X-RAM, however, this could become a more compelling solution. What's really

lacking is an entry-level gamers' card. We'd love to see a $149 retail card just packing the 64MB of X-RAM and nothing else.

X-Fi is a stunning achievement in PC audio, but if Creative is serious about promoting OpenAL as a solution for the gaming industry, it needs to make the X-Fi technology much more pervasive. Meaning: Drop the price—and quick! Until then, content creators are the big winners here with the Elite Pro. / Lloyd Case and Jason Cross

X-Fi Elite Pro $400

For the high-end audio buff or musician that wants it all, no matter what it costs.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

X-Fi Fatal1ty FPS $280

With clean sound and awesome performance, it rocks games. If only it were $130 less.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½

X-FI IS A STUNNING ACHIEVEMENT IN PC AUDIO, BUT THESE BLEEDING EDGE CARDS COST TOP DOLLAR. WILL THE MORE AFFORDABLE PLATINUM KIT SATISFY GAMERS? FIND OUT NEXT ISSUE.

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SON OF SONATA

A second take on a classic modder's PC case

MANUFACTURER **Antec**
PRODUCT **Sonata II PC Case**

I INTRODUCED MORE THAN TWO YEARS ago, the original Sonata case from Antec was one of our favorites. It married especially quiet operation with simple, clean aesthetics at a reasonable price. A lot has changed in those two years. Processors and graphics cards run hotter than ever, while requiring ever-louder cooling solutions and better airflow. Enter the Sonata II. Rather than dramatically redesigning the classic, Antec has instead made several important tweaks inside the case, so it's better suited to current high-end components. But has Antec gone far enough?

Immediately upon taking off the side door, you can make out the new 450-watt SmartPower 2.0 power supply (with appropriate plugs for PCI Express graphics cards and SATA drives) and massive plastic air duct. The power supply will handle most of your gaming needs until you try adding on lots of drives, dual high-end graphics cards, and a really beefy CPU. If you go the SLI route, you'll need a bigger power supply.

The duct, though, is the big change that solves some of the noise problems of the past but introduces all-new headaches. Because different motherboards have their sockets located in different places and CPU coolers come in various shapes and sizes, the air duct is adjustable. It slides back and forth a couple inches, and the part that comes down over the CPU moves up and down and retracts a bit to accommodate coolers of various heights. That's a good way to pull cool air in over the CPU without putting noisy fans or ventilation holes on the side of the case, but it does make life a little more complicated. It's damn tough getting the duct back into place with a PCI soundcard installed, and it's annoying to have to remove the whole thing every time you want to get at virtually anything that plugs into your motherboard. CPUs, RAM, graphics cards, or soundcards—you name it, the duct obscures it. And hotheads are officially warned. Much twisting and turning is needed if you have any PCI cards installed toward the bottom edge of your motherboard.

We've always liked the Sonata, and the Sonata II does a good job of making some basic improvements for modern high-performance components. Essentially, this is a Sonata with a dual-hinge door, a bigger and quieter power supply, a large duct to bring cool air into the CPU, and no air holes on the sides. If you've used a Sonata before or liked the design of it, you'll be pleased with this one. **/Jason Cross**

RATHER THAN REDESIGN A CLASSIC, SEVERAL TWEAKS ARE MADE.

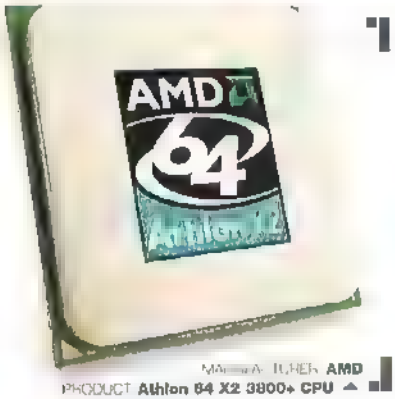
X-Fi Elite Pro **$130**

A mainstay of system builders for the next year or two, or at least until BTX cases take over.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★½

THE PRICE OF GENIUS

AMD's "low-end" 64-bit CPU will knock your socks off



MANUFACTURER **AMD**
PRODUCT **Athlon 64 X2 3800+ CPU**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

TO SAY AMD'S ATHLON 64 X2 4800+ rocks is an understatement. It's the fastest CPU we've ever tested in almost every application and benchmark, sometimes by a huge margin. There's only one problem. Do you have $900 to drop on just a CPU? Intel's top-of-the-line CPUs are in the same boat, straddling the $1,000 mark—it's just that Intel has been able to push dual-core technology down to affordable prices in the form of the Pentium D model 820. However, with its new X2 3800+, AMD fires one back across Intel's bow.

The 3800+ is pretty much identical to the previously released X2 processors, only it runs at 2.0GHz with 512KB of L2 cache per core. It's based on the same 90nm Manchester core as the Athlon 64 X2 4200 and 4600 processors, so it has SSE3 support along with the improved memory controller that better supports mismatched pairs of DIMMs. It's still not cheap, but this is finally a dual-core Athlon 64 that mere mortals can afford.

Running 32-bit Windows XP Professional, we stacked up the CPU against four competitors: the high-end dual-core Pentium 4 840 Extreme Edition and the Athlon 64 X2 4800+, as well as AMD's single-core FX-55 chip and the Pentium D model 820. What shocked us is that while the 3800+ underperforms compared to the Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU ($811), it holds a steady pace and crushes outright both Intel's Pentium D 820 and Pentium Extreme Edition 840 CPUs in real-world 3D game tests. Whether playing *Doom 3*, *Painkiller* (1.6.3 update), *Flight Simulator 2004*, or *Unreal Tournament 2004*, the winner is, as usual, AMD.

At around $365, AMD's latest dual-core processor does a pretty good job of addressing our only real complaint about the X2 line—its exorbitant price. Over time, this little gem will get cheap enough to fit into those $1,000 PCs with ease. It's still a premium processor, but one you can afford. Most important for gamers, though, is that it runs games at a great clip now, and you'll be all set for when those multithreaded games start to arrive in another six to 12 months. **/Jason Cross**

HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. Go to extremetech.com for detailed comparative data on other CPUs.

Athlon 64 X2 3800+ **$365**

Impressive performance at a killer price

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★½

3DMark05—CPU test

WORST ATHLON 64 X2 3800+ BEST

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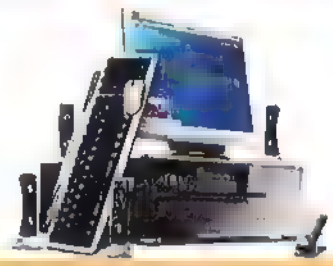

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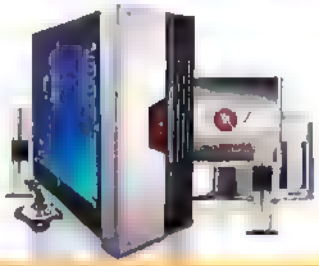

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THREE BLINDING MICE

Which of the new pro-gaming optical mice takes our bait?

BENJAMINS ALERT! Do you really need to spend this much money on a mouse? Grab the G5 then ask us again.

Is everyone making laser-based gaming mice these days? Someone out there is buying these pro-gamer-level peripherals, apparently, or we wouldn't be seeing three companies launching products at the same time. Each one of these optical mice replaces the less-focused LED with a laser, offering more precise movement and better tracking across a wider variety of surfaces—but is one of these mice worth the money? If you number among the proud, the few, and the truly hardcore, then yes. Which one should you buy? Read on./ **Jason Cross**

MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRODUCT: **G5 Laser Optical Mouse**

LOGITECH G5 LASER OPTICAL MOUSE

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

The Hardware: No question, $70 is a lot to ask for a wired mouse, but we're tempted to lay down the cash after testing the G5. This is probably the best gaming mouse we've ever used. The G5 fits comfortably in your hand thanks to textured, rubberized grips around the edges. While trimming down to only one side button on the mouse, the center wheel is upgraded with a side-to-side rocking capability—and a satisfying "clicky" feel. It just melds perfectly with your hand—so long as you're a righty. Unlike the other mice listed here, the G5 is not symmetrical, so lefties may have a tougher time at the controls. Also handy is the LED readout on the top of the G5 that shows you the currently selected sensitivity speed.

Then there's the weight cartridge. Similar to how dart fiends make use of custom weights, you can load up a little plastic square with up to eight round weights. Once you drop them in and make the cartridge as hefty as you want, you jam it back into the slot beneath the G5. In short, it handles like a dream after a little customization.

The Software: You don't need to install anything for speed tweaks. Hitting buttons beneath the scroll wheel lets you instantly toggle between 400, 800, and 2,000 dpi. With the included *SetPoint* software, though, these values can be fine-tuned. Button assignments can be made on a per-application basis, and the Advanced Game Settings menu lets you assign low, medium, and high dpi settings for individual games./

Logitech G5 — $70

Without a doubt, the best gaming mouse to date.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD — VERDICT: ★★★★★

MANUFACTURER: **Razer** PRODUCT: **Copperhead**

RAZER COPPERHEAD

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

The Hardware: Someone needs to spend less time making stuff glow and a little more time worrying about ergonomics. Even though there are promises of customizable weights for this mouse, they weren't available at review time. Still, what matters is performance.

Tracking is extremely smooth and precise with the Copperhead, which operates at a 2,000 dpi resolution, but we can't spot any difference between this and the G5. The neat new trick is the inclusion of 32KB of onboard memory. It can store your mouse config and profiles, making it a snap to take your settings to a foreign machine.

Razer has made a great gaming mouse for hardcore gamers—especially southpaws (thanks to the Copperhead's symmetrical design) and control freaks who need two thumb buttons on each side. We just prefer the G5.

The Software: Razer's mouse software tries a little too hard to be cool, with glowing text and fly-out menus, but everything you want is there. Adjust the sensor resolution, tweak sensitivity on X and Y axes separately, and reprogram every button on the mouse. In fact, in addition to having the ability to set the buttons to perform whatever command you want, you can even set macros for them and save them into the mouse's onboard RAM./

Razer Copperhead — $80

A great mouse for hardcore gamers.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD — VERDICT: ★★★★½

MICROSOFT LASER MOUSE 6000

The Hardware: The LM6000 may have a 6-megapixels-per-second sensor (hence the "6000") and a slick design, but it's rife with problems.

To begin with, the shape just doesn't fit a human hand. It's simply not round and thick enough to make much contact with, so you end up moving the mouse with your fingertips on the buttons and the sides. It seems obvious that no gamer ever really tested this thing. The mouse isn't comfortable, doesn't move nearly as smoothly and accurately as other laser-powered mice, is too lightweight, and has terrible side-button placement. Congratulations, Microsoft. This is the worst mouse you've ever made.

The Software: Thankfully, everything is handled easily from the Buttons tab in the Mouse Properties control panel. Microsoft gives you the ability to remap the functions for every button on the mouse, while a Gaming Toggle function lets you program a macro series of keystrokes on the fly. The downside is that the macros play back at light-speed, not real time./

Microsoft 6000 — $55

There's little use for this mouse except maybe as a noose.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD — VERDICT: ★½☆☆☆

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

Yet another keyboard for FPS gamers—and we like it!

MANUFACTURER: **PD Scientific**
PRICE: **Wolf Claw Type II Keyboard**

BE HONEST: HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE the number pad? Designed for FPS gamers, yet not exclusive to them, the Wolf Claw Type II adds a dedicated area to the left side of the keyboard for gaming. To make room for this added area, space was saved by removing one-third of the right side of the keyboard (where the arrows and number pad are) while also rearranging other keys here and there. Basically, if WASD is the center of your universe, we've found your new keyboard.

The new left-hand section replicates keys that are already on the main keyboard but groups them all together to keep you from stretching all over while playing *Half-Life 2*. The keys are designed with WASD and a vertical Space bar at the center of the action, while outer keys surround your hand through an arc shape, meaning your hand remains stationary during use.

There is pretty much no learning curve to master when playing with the Wolf Claw. Why? It's simply an improvement on a format we've been using for years, so our kung fu was still at its peak when we started playing. Unlike Ideazon's Zboard, there are no gimmicks and no software to fuss with—and therein lies the beauty of this USB keyboard.

This whole tectonic shift results in some compromises. You win some keys while losing others. The most obvious loss is the number pad, and you'll also need to retrain your brain to find some keys (if anything, the Wolf Claw's key layout closely resembles a notebook's).

Under normal computing conditions, most gaming keyboards are a wash. If you ever turn off *Battlefield 2* and get down to business, you're sometimes stuck with a loud, clunky mess that feels like cheap plastic. The Wolf Claw, however, isn't junk. It can replace your old keyboard. The buttons here are soft and quiet and have the feel of a high-end keyboard. This is the best gaming keyboard we've come across—it's plain and simple, quick and painless, and easy to use.
/Jeremy Atkinson

Wolf Claw $50

[illegible] number pad.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★½

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EXTREMETECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech.com's Loyd Case is on call—open up and say ahhh

I HAVE A PENTIUM 640. IS IT TRUE THAT EMT64T emulates 64 bits and my system is not actually running in 64 bit on Windows XP x64?

Charles Cloutier

No, it's actually running in true 64-bit mode. There are some subtle differences between the way AMD handles 64-bit processing and the way Intel's EM64T works. But the important thing to know is this: The 64-bit wide registers, large memory addressing, and additional register files are all there.

First, a question about my processor: Because I use AMD's 90nm San Diego core Athlon 64+ 3700, do I get the added bonus of the integrated 128-bit wide memory controller and 114 million transistors as opposed to the ClawHammer core (Athlon 64 3200+)? Second, even with this system, I scored only a 7,954 in the free version of 3DMark 2005 with resolution at 1024x768 at 32 bit. If I were to upgrade one thing on this computer, what should it be? Adding an extra 7600GTX graphics card?

Alex Weinstein

First, your 90nm San Diego core is better than the ClawHammer. For one thing, AMD implemented the SSE3 instruction set with San Diego. It's also got the full 128-bit wide memory controller power. Second, adding a second 7800GTX would indeed give you a better 3DMark score—but you have to ask yourself if it's worth it. A single 7800GTX will probably allow you to play almost all games at high resolutions, with both antialiasing (AA) and anisotropic filtering (AF) enabled.

I live on a hill with no cable and a terrible phone line. Also, we can't get DSL where I live. My only solution is Direcway satellite Internet. But for some reason, Internet games like *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield 2*, and *Counter-Strike: Source* are so freaking laggy, it's depressing. Also, downloading demos doesn't work, and the speed for downloads is only 300kbps but drops to 100kbps in a second. I was just wondering if you knew if satellite Internet can even play games or download well.

Ben

I'm not sure about the download speeds, but your lag issue with games is definitely because of the satellite Internet service. Because the signal has to make a full round trip up to the satellite, then back to earth, it introduces a large delay in packet transmission time. The result is massive lag when playing games online. I hate to say it, but you may have to move if you want to play online.

I HATE TO SAY IT, BUT YOU MAY HAVE TO MOVE IF YOU WANT TO PLAY ONLINE.

I have a question regarding linking videocards. Can a Radeon 9550 (SLI) link with the 9800 I have already? Or could I link the 9800 with an Nvid a 6600?

Drew Leavay

The answer to both your questions is no. You can currently use SLI only with Nvidia-based boards, ranging from the GeForce 6600 on up to its new 7800GTX. However, you need a motherboard with an Nvidia chipset and two PCI Express x16 slots. ATI is coming out with its version of SLI, which the company calls CrossFire. The only catch is that CrossFire will work only with the newer ATI cards (X800 series on up). By the way, only PCI Express graphics cards will work in dual-slot systems; AGP cards need not apply.

I am a *World of WarCraft* addict. My system is not too bad, in my humble opinion: AMD Barton 3200+, 1GB DDR RAM, 256MB GeForce FX 5900 Ultra. I typically have 90-180 latency according to the game's meter. What can I do to not lag when walking into congested areas?

James Nolan

You might be confusing "lag" with "low framerate." Lag is network latency: It's when your system is running smoothly but you click to interact with something and it takes a long time to communicate with the server and send the data back. If you click to attack and it takes five seconds to start attacking, that's lag. If you go into a congested area and everything gets choppy, that's just poor framerate. A gigabyte of RAM is good, and your processor is OK, and that graphics card should be able to handle the game at a medium level. *World of WarCraft* bogs down in crowded areas like cities because it has to page in lots of varied artwork and animation for all those different players. Maybe you should turn down some of your graphics options a bit—texture detail specifically—and turn on the Level of Detail option. You'll want to make sure you're not running a bunch of background applications (virus scanner, P2P software, stuff like that) while you play, and definitely defrag your hard drive.

MANUFACTURER: AMD
PRODUCT: Athlon 64 X2 3800+ CPU

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

Guitammer ButtKicker Gamer

ROCK YOUR BODY

Why crank up the volume when you can sit on a subwoofer?

"FEEL WHAT YOU'VE BEEN MISSING" IS the slogan for Guitammer's ButtKicker Gamer. Allow me to briefly sum up what you've been missing: the sensation of some jackass booting the bottom of your chair whenever you take a shot in *Battlefield 2*. Or, more accurately, it's as if you're sitting on top of a huge speaker and the vibrations are shaking out your fillings. The latter is especially true if you crank up the juice.

The ButtKicker series started off in home theaters. By bolting a motor to the back of a couch and hooking it into your home theater, you could finally rock your own world. It delivered the same spine-tingling sensation as that Def Leppard concert you went to back in 1989. RAWK! So who better to next subject to a subsonic assault than the PC gaming crowd?

Before you even consider buying this, check your computer chair. Does the seat have some heft to it? Featherweights will rattle apart with extended use. Is it a single center-post chair? If you answered "yes" to both, you're in business. After clamping a motor to the post, you need to wire up the 100-watt amplifier and plug it into your PC (it also works with other audio sources). Installation is fairly simple; the ButtKicker Gamer includes all the wires you need to hook it up to your soundcard. Of course the downside of having so many wires is that you're going to be left with a tangled mess of spaghetti wires by your chair.

Certainly not the most sophisticated device, the ButtKicker relies on brute force and bass-heavy tones to launch sound at your posterior. The rattle of machine guns and bomb blasts felt good—a little too good if you ask me. Even in shooters like *Doom 3*, it picked up some of the ambient sounds and further sold the drama. You just need to tweak the settings so that it doesn't also respond to baritone voices.

This is definitely not for everyone, but as crazy as it may sound, the ButtKicker Gamer, for the most part, works as advertised. Would I buy it? No. And for those lining up to get their butts kicked, it ain't cheap at $150. Then again, you're probably used to taking a beating. **/Darren Gladstone**

ButtKicker Gamer ... $150

For gamers that want to be moved... or are just lonely on a Friday night.

Computer Gaming World — VERDICT ★★★½☆

» AS CRAZY AS IT MAY SOUND, THE BUTTKICKER GAMER WORKS.

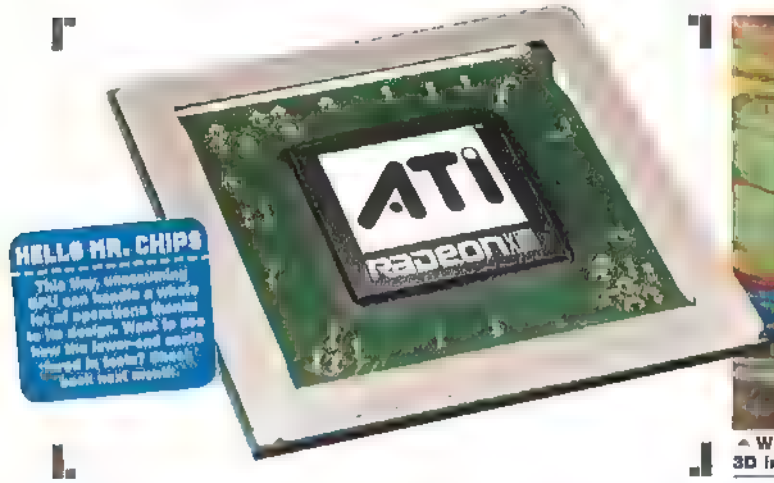
Take a look at our new mice, PADS

It's all about performance. It's all about power. And that's exactly what you get with our new range of PC Gamepads. All featuring mouse look ability, each pad now lets you dive into any FPS game and look around or take aim with the tip of your thumb. So you never have to touch a mouse or take your hands off the game, giving you better control and more comfort. As always, engineered with superior technology, sculpted for spectacular styling and most importantly packed with powerful features for control that is simply lethal. Available in dual analog, rumble or wireless we know you'll love what you see. Any way you look at it.

Saitek

CAUGHT IN THE

After six months of silence, ATI fires back at Nvidia with new graphics cards



HELLO MR. CHIPS

This time, unsurprisingly, GPU can handle a whole lot of operations thanks to its design. Want to see how the lower-end cards turned in faster results? Look next month!

▲ What you're looking at is a flat texture that has been treated to look 3D in the environment.

CODE-NAMED R520, ATI'S NEWEST graphics card chipset promised a radical new architecture. It also promised to come out this past June. What happened? A circuit bug. A few transistors out of hundreds of millions held things up. Now called the X1000 line, ATI's chipset is finally here. But is it too little, too late? Has ATI managed to knock Nvidia's 7800 GTX off its throne—or just catch up? We got our hands on the high-end members of the X1000 family—the X1800 XL and X1800 XT—to walk you through the most dramatic change in PC graphics architectures in a very long time.

BUILDING A BETTER CARD

There's so much new stuff in these cards that it's hard to wrap your head around everything. Here's the quick rundown: ATI has caught up to Nvidia with full support for Shader Model 3.0—and ATI claims to do it better. Games with long, complex shaders and lots of dynamic branching suffer less when run on its card, ATI says, but we'll have to wait for more advanced games to test those claims. The new memory controller, shader-thread dispatch unit, and improvements to compression and cache are extremely promising. The operative word for ATI's new architecture is efficiency. The design allows smaller CPUs to work smarter and get clocked higher. ATI is doing more with less on the chip.

In the past, ATI has taken plenty of knocks for its lack of driver support. Finally coming around, ATI has promised drivers for its entire line of cards (not just the X1000 series) that will take advantage of dual-core processors to offload driver overhead and improve the speed of some geometry setup functions. With CrossFire (ATI's take on SLI mode) any two cards in the X1000 family can work together. Get the top-of-the-line X1800 XT, and if you want to, partner it with an X1600 card for a speed bump. Theoretically, when the SDKs are available, game developers could code physics operations to these boards.

Videophiles need to know that this is the first ATI product to utilize the Avivo-branded upgrades for video output. This is a topic for a whole other article, but the short version is this: High-quality video scalers allow for some of the sharpest video output possible—a full 10-bit signal over DVI. The biggest benefits are noticeable on MPEG-2 and H.264 decode acceleration. Initial tests are, to say the least, impressive.

What matters to gamers is an adaptive antialiasing mode, which essentially does the same thing as Nvidia's Transparency Adaptive AA—just better. A textured surface with transparencies in it is one area where ATI's offerings outshine the competition. ATI provides a 6x multisampling AA mode, while Nvidia still maxes out at 4x multisampling. And here's a neat trick: ATI's antialiasing works with all HDR games, while Nvidia's AA doesn't work with any HDR game we know of other than *Half-Life 2*.

GAME ON

Testing on an Athlon 64 FX-55 system, we noticed a couple trends. First, in *Half-Life 2* tests, the X1800 XT runs neck-and-neck with the 7800 GTX. Similarly, the X1800 XL keeps pace with the 7800 GT. That is, until you turn on the antialiasing and anisotropic filtering (AF). With 4x AA and 8x AF, the X1800 XT gains a 10 to 20 percent advantage over the 7800 GTX, and the X1800 XL runs 5 to 10 percent faster than the 7800 GT. This is definitely a win for ATI, though we wouldn't call the difference earth-shattering on the lesser cards.

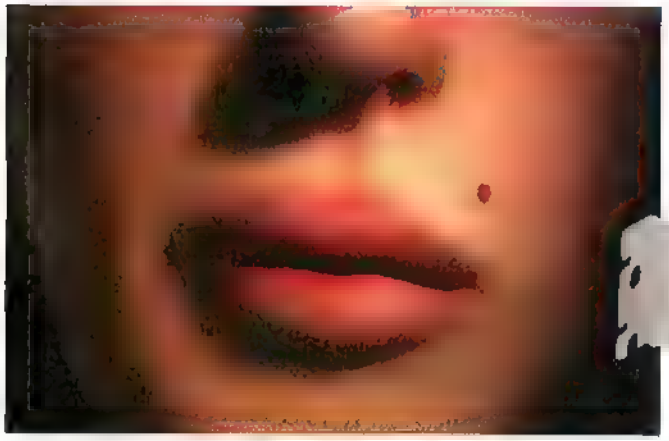
Nvidia still holds ground in *Doom 3*. It could be because its OpenGL drivers are better, it could be because *Doom 3* is one of the few big hit games that supports Nvidia's UltraShadow technology to eliminate unseen vertices from extruded shadow volumes. Whatever the reason, the difference is substantial. ATI's top-of-the-line $550 Radeon X1800 XT has trouble keeping up with the GeForce 7800 GT, available now for about $370. Though *Doom 3* itself doesn't get much play anymore, its

RADEON CARDS

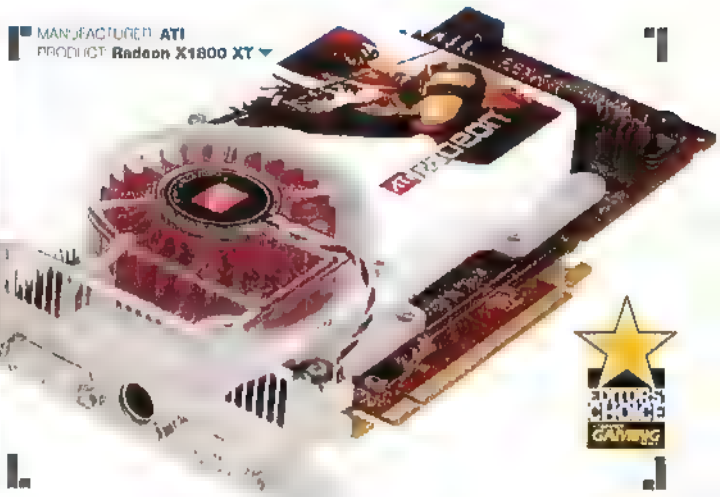
The Radeon X1000 series features a top-to-bottom line of products from $100 to $550. We will review the remaining cards in upcoming issues, but here's a list of the various products:

	Radeon X1800 XT	Radeon X1800 XL	Radeon X1600 XT	Radeon X1600 Pro	Radeon X1300 Pro	Radeon X1300
ESTIMATED PRICE	$550/$500	$450	$250/$200	$200/$150	$150	$130/$100
RELEASE	11/05	10/05	11/30	11/30	10/05	10/05
CORE CLOCK SPEED	625MHz	500MHz	590MHz	500MHz	600MHz	450MHz
MEMORY CLOCK SPEED	1.5GHz (750MHz DDR)	1.0GHz (500MHz DDR)	1.38GHz (690MHz DDR)	780MHz (340MHz DDR)	800MHz (400MHz DDR)	500MHz (350MHz DDR)
AMOUNT OF RAM	512MB/256MB	256MB	256MB/128MB	256MB/ 128MB	256MB	256MB/128MB

CROSSFIRE



▲ Hey! Is this a makeup commercial or a graphics demo?



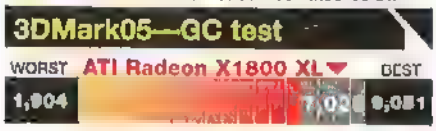
engine is still a very relevant benchmark. *Quake 4*, *Prey*, and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* all use it.

The X1800 XT shows a commanding lead in *Call of Duty 2* performance. With AA and AF disabled, it runs the game just over 10 percent faster. Turn on those features, and the performance gap widens. At 1280x1024 with AA and AF enabled, ATI is almost 50 percent faster! For the ATI faithful, the biggest news here is the tremendous leap in performance between ATI's previous best card, the X850 XT, and its new X1800 cards. At high resolutions, they're running two to three times faster.

The story isn't as good for the X1800 XL. It is 10 to 15 percent slower than the 7800 GT with no AA or AF, and 15 to 40 percent slower with them turned on. We should point out that there's something pretty fishy about the scores in this game on Nvidia's cards. The performance at 1600x1200 is almost identical to performance at 1280x1024 with AA and AF enabled. It's as if something wasn't working the way it should have been at the highest resolution. We don't want to disparage Nvidia's win with the 7800 GT in this game, but we think it's odd that performance doesn't change when stepping up to the higher resolution.

It's clear that ATI's new offerings are much more than a simple speed upgrade. From a feature-set perspective, ATI matches or exceeds Nvidia's 7800 series at every turn. We're impressed with the Radeon X1800 XT. In the "money is no object" world of $400-and-up graphics cards, this is the fastest one we've tested yet. Without AA or AF, it's basically on par with the GeForce 7800 GTX, but you don't buy $500 graphics cards to run without AA or AF, do you? It's also great to see ATI offer a 512MB card on the high end, and at a reasonable $50 price premium over the 256MB card. We're a bit disappointed that ATI hasn't managed to get its cooling solution for this card down to a single slot or significantly reduce its noise output, relative to the Radeon X850 XT. Under a heavy load, it's just a bit too noisy a card, but the X1800 XT has plenty to crow about.

While the X1800 XT impresses, and chews through tests for breakfast, the X1800 XL is a bit of a letdown. It's not that it's a bad card...far from it! With all the talk of the advanced superfast 90nm manufacturing process and the extremely efficient architecture, it's only just as fast as a GeForce 7800 GT at high resolutions with AA and AF enabled. Turn AA and AF off, and the Nvidia card is a little bit faster. We wouldn't make a big deal about it, except that the suggested retail price is $449, while GeForce 7800 GT cards are widely available for $50 to $80 less. Not only that, but also, many vendors ship seriously overclocked 7800 GT cards with only a minimal price markup. For the Radeon X1800 XL to earn a preferred status, ATI needs to cut the price by at least $50. Maybe ATI's board partners will sell X1800 XL cards at discounted rates below $400, and perhaps a good number of them will offer overclocked cards. Ultimately, though, the GeForce 7800 GT gets the nod in this second matchup. / Jason Cross



ATI Radeon X1800 XL $450

Doesn't quite stack up to the power of Nvidia's 7800 GT, considering the price.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½☆

ATI Radeon X1800 XT $500

The king is dead. Long live the king.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

THE NUMBERS GAME

So, which card is better, ATI's or Nvidia's?

The X1800 XT has a core clock speed of 625MHz. The 7800 GTX, by comparison, runs at 430MHz. That extra boost allows ATI to match Nvidia on the theoretical fill rate of pixel shader pipelines, even though the X1800 XT has eight fewer pipes (the 7800 GTX has 24 while the X1800 XT has 16). Memory bandwidth is identical on the 7800 GT and X1800 XL, but the X1800 XT has a big 10GB/second advantage in peak memory bandwidth. That's 25 percent more raw memory bandwidth. While we're on the subject of horsepower, don't forget that the X1800 XT will be available in a 512MB version ($550), while we've heard of no such beast for the 7800 GTX.

IN THE "MONEY-IS-NO-OBJECT" WORLD OF $400-AND-UP GRAPHICS CARDS, THE X1800 XT IS THE FASTEST ONE YET.

TOM vs. BRUCE

PUBLISHER: Battlefront.com
DEVELOPER: Dan Verssen Games
GENRE: Strategy

LAST MONTH...
Playing as the cheese-loving French, Bruce bested Tom in a rousing round of Crown of Glory. Zut alors!

▲ This is the kind of guy who flies Bruce's Corsairs. (Draw your own conclusions.)

DOWN IN FLAMES

Or, Rabaul, I hardly knew ya

TOM: I USED TO PLAY A LOT OF FLIGHT SIMS back when they existed. A few years ago, I finally realized I was never going to use my joystick again, so I put it in a closet next to my cloth map of Britannia and a box of floppy disks. But when Bruce told me we were going to play a World War II flight sim called *Down in Flames*, I hauled out the joystick and spent a half hour or so trying to plug it into the extra VGA port on my $400 video-card. USB has made us all dumb. Well, it's made me dumb, at any rate.

Then I discovered I wouldn't need the joystick, since *Down in Flames* is actually a cardless version of a card game. Having played a lot of *Magic*, I immediately went back to my closet and hauled out a few boxes of cards. I had a few Moxes in there I was hoping to be able to use.

BRUCE: For some inexplicable reason, when Battlefront converted *Down in Flames: The Card Game* into *Down in Flames: The Computer Game*, the company explicitly hid the card-based mechanic behind some animations and text messages—as though card games don't warrant a $35 purchase price. Unfortunately, Battlefront also hid a lot of other stuff, like pilot skills, the specific effects of fatigue, and range to target, all for apparently no reason other than that the developers failed Interface 101. Good thing the game itself is great.

TOM: The Solomon Islands campaign matches superior numbers of frail nimble Japanese fighters and pokey bombers against a handful of stout American bombers and some badass Corsairs.

▲ You are here.

▲ Your best Zero is over here.

If you don't know what Corsairs are, think back to that TV show *Baa Baa Black Sheep* in which Robert "I dare you to knock this battery off my shoulder" Conrad played a guy who flew Corsairs. You might recall that those planes were so cool that their gull wings made them look like they were shrugging their shoulders at the prospect of flying against the Empire of the Rising Sun. "Enemies?" they seemed to ask. "Who cares?" Then Robert Conrad would grin from the cockpit, dazzling the audience with his white teeth and 1970s good looks. Of course, I'm too young to remember that show, but Jeff Green talks about it a lot.

TURN ONE

BRUCE: Although the game is really coy about revealing it, the Japanese are flying from Rabaul and the Allies are flying from Guadalcanal. There are three territories between them. Each turn, the territories are worth a certain number of points to one player or the other for being bombed or defended. Sometimes territories are only good for fighter battles. It's all wildly random and about as historically accurate as hav-

>> A TONY IS A SECOND-RATE FIGHTER, A FRANK STALLONE TO THE SYLVESTERS THAT ARE MY ZEROES. BUT IT'S A FIGHTER NONETHELESS.

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

Tom Chick
In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk
When he's not writing about nerdy war games, Bruce Geryk spends his days putting a hard-earned medical degree to good use.

ing Russia bomb Luxembourg. But since aircraft are secretly assigned and then simultaneously revealed, it can make for a very tense game, historical wackiness aside.

I have only four pairs of fighters. Two of them have a lot of experience, meaning they're high level and have a lot of extra abilities, like good armor class and high dexterity. I call them my A team. The other two are just starting out, which means they still have their training swords and newbie armor. They're the B team. For me, a lot of this game is going to hinge on not getting any of these guys too shot up and fatigued. If I get one or more of them killed, then Nimitz help me.

TOM: Guadalcanal is the only target for me to bomb during this turn and my two Bettys are the only bombers that can reach it. I'm not about to risk those girls for a paltry two points, so all bomber pilots get to rest up—which is a big fat waste of the turn, considering they have zero fatigue. Thanks, *Down in Flames*, for screwing me right out of the gate.

Hoping to catch Bruce's fearsome B-17 Flying Fortress early on, I guard Rabaul, which is a juicy target for the Allies. I use my best Zero pilots, Seiji in his regular M2 Zero and Junichi in his awesomely advanced M5 Zero. Hopefully I'll catch me a Flying Fortress.

BRUCE: I'm sure Tom is going to be defending Rabaul with his best planes, and I'd prefer to concede two points than incur serious fatigue penalties if things go wrong there. Likewise, I'm not going to risk any bombers at Munda for just two points. And I'd even rather give Tom two points for bombing Guadalcanal than incur fatigue for a one-point reward.

Instead, I'm hitting only two targets this turn. My Flying Fortress and B-25 bomb Santa Isabel, while my A team of Corsairs goes on the fighter sweep. While it's only two points, I hope to catch as many fighters as Tom wants to send there, and to give them a beating.

So on turn one, I'm outright conceding five points to Tom. This means I need to win both of the areas I'm contesting in order to come out ahead, and even then it will be a one-point game. But I'm pretty confident of winning, and the first turn is about not fatiguing my pilots. Once the targets start getting more valuable, I'll hopefully be flying fresh pilots against Tom's tired squadrons.

TOM: The big news this turn is a dogfight in which I get bracketed by Bruce's fighters, one pair coming up from below and the other descending on me from above. I manage to score a sweet scissors maneuver using my Zero's agility, but Bruce gets me with a vertical roll followed by a deadly card called In My Sights: Destroyed. Why can't I draw a convenient In My Sights: Destroyed?

BRUCE: Shooting down, or even damaging, enemy planes greatly increases the fatigue they incur. That's if they bail out. One of Tom's pilots goes down with his Zero, leaving his partner to fly solo for the rest of the game. There are no reinforcements.

TOM: Unfortunately, my only encounter with

▲ It's a little like an aerial square dance...except that actually, it's Tom's sleepy pilots lining up to get shot down by Bruce's well-rested pilots. Which is not like any square dance we've ever been to.

▲ Bye-bye, Betty!

Bruce's bombers is in Santa Isabel, where I've got a pilot with exactly zero experience points. Stupid noob. He just watches while Bruce drops a bunch of bombs on my stuff. If there were points for recon, I would have totally rocked on this mission.

SCORE: Bruce 6, Tom 3

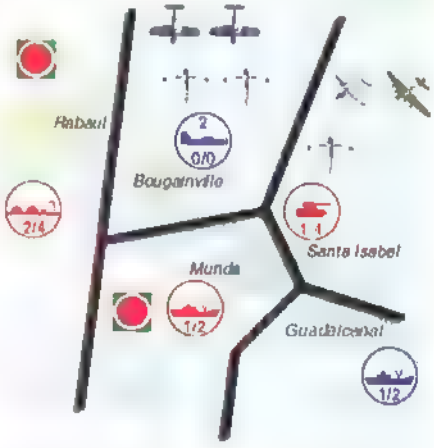
TURN TWO

BRUCE: Once again, I have only one target to defend (Guadalcanal), but this time Tom would get eight points for successfully bombing it, so I have to fly air cover. I send the A team to handle this important mission, and send the B team to Santa Isabel, where a two-point fighter sweep is available. I'm hoping Tom will be sending his best fighters either as escorts to Guadalcanal (where the A team will meet them) or as Rabaul defenders (where they'll meet no one).

Yes, once again I'm passing up the Rabaul points. I'm not excited about incurring more fatigue on my medium and heavy bombers for just five points. I'm hoping to sneak into Bougainville with some dive-bombers and catch Tom napping. I've conceded five points this time, but if I can win the other three areas, I gain nine.

TOM: Now I've got a worthwhile target for my bombers. Guadalcanal, here we come! It's going to be tough dropping enough ordnance to score the points, so I'm sending both Bettys in. Good luck, ladies. I once again keep Seiji and Junichi over Rabaul, hoping to intercept Bruce's heavier

▲ Animal prints are in this year....

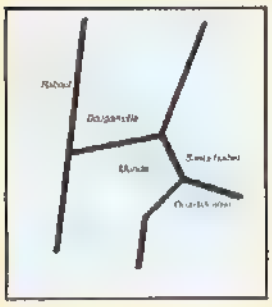


bombers. Meanwhile, I take advantage of the luxury of having scads of pilots by sending them to the four corners of the Earth—or at least the five areas in the Solomon Islands—to look for Bruce's planes.

BRUCE: Sure enough, Tom goes for the eight-point grand prize in Guadalcanal. The game randomly assigns the bombers to come in at very low altitude. Fighting at this altitude gives my Corsairs a bonus to their horsepower, which is basically the number of cards I can cycle through my hand each turn. Since ▸

Battlefront Times

ALLIED VICTORY IN SOLOMONS!



Axis Casualties
Fighters Destroyed: 10
Fighters Damaged: 12
Bombers Destroyed: 10
Bombers Damaged: 10
Pilots Killed/Captured: 5

Allied Casualties
Fighters Destroyed: 0
Fighters Damaged: 1
Bombers Destroyed: 4
Bombers Damaged: 4
Pilots Killed/Captured: 2

▲ **Breaking news: Tom sucks at *Down in Flames*!**

>> IF TONYS ARE THE EQUIVALENT OF FRANK STALLONE, OSCARS ARE THE EQUIVALENT OF WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE IF DOLPH LUNDGREN HAD A YOUNGER BROTHER TRYING TO MAKE IT IN SHOW BIZ.

bombers can only react and not attack on their own, this allows me to rapidly cycle my cards until I get a good combination and then pummel Tom's planes repeatedly while he watches. At the end I get a bit cocky, and Angel Diaz—the wingman of my Pappy Boyington analog, Paul Myers—gets shot up pretty good. But everyone makes it home, which is not the case for Tom's pilots. Two of his bombers lose their crews and will be flying solo for the rest of the game. That's a huge blow.

TOM: Adding injury to insult, Bruce's Dauntless dive-bombers manage to shoot down one of my Tonys. A Tony is a second-rate fighter, a Frank Stallone to the Sylvesters that are my Zeroes. But it's a fighter nonetheless, meaning that it should shoot down bombers instead of getting shot down by bombers. But in *Down in Flames*, bombers have some card voodoo played by the A.I. so quickly that you don't get to see what's going on. It's like this: cardcardcardcardcard—you're dead! What's worse, the Dauntless kills the pilot and leaves me with a gimped Tony whose contribution to the war will be on par with Frank Stallone's contribution to Hollywood.

SCORE: Bruce 15, Tom 8

TURN THREE

TOM: I'm splitting up my best pilots for the fighter sweeps over Rabaul and Guadalcanal. Once again, Junichi in his lovely M5 Zero stays over Rabaul, but this time he's accompanied by the worthless noob who watched Bruce's bombers unload on Santa Isabel. My second- and third-best pilots, Seiji and Daizo, fly over Guadalcanal.

BRUCE: This turn brings out the chance for some major dogfighting: Both Rabaul and Guadalcanal have five-point fighter sweeps. Yet this turn, I'm going to take the biggest gamble I've made so far and concede 10 full points to Tom in order to rest my A team and have them at full strength for an all-out push on the final turn. That leaves me with just the B team as fighter cover.

I can realistically defend only Guadalcanal or Santa Isabel this turn. Because of the way the points work out, my best shot is to contest Guadalcanal and let Tom bomb Santa Isabel uncontested.

I'm hoping Tom assigns max fighters to these sweeps, as I am allocating all my bombers this turn and that may mean fewer interceptors elsewhere. The B-17s and B-25s hit Bougainville while the Dauntlesses dive-bomb Munda. That last one is just a hunch: I don't think Tom will bother defending an area that is worth only one point for successful defense and only two to me if I bomb it.

TOM: If I've learned one thing from this game, it's that tired pilots suck. I've been running my boys all over the Solomons and they haven't had time to sleep, as I can see by their high fatigue scores. But one of the problems with *Down in Flames* is that when you play a campaign game, there's no indication of fatigue's effect. This is odd, since the default game is really explicit. It says helpful things like, "Hey, if you fly now, you're going to have -1 airframe" or "Dude, this guy has been run so ragged that he can't even get a single burst in a P-40 Thunderbolt." These are things I like to know. But when I'm playing a campaign game, it says unhelpful things, like "27" or "39."

So imagine my surprise when I finally corner a couple of Bruce's pilots only to discover that Seiji and Daizo are so tired that when Bruce plays something as innocuous as an In My Sights 1:2 card, it's the equivalent of a head shot with an aimbot in *Counter-Strike* on a guy who forgot to buy a helmet. The end result: down in flames, indeed. Sayonara, sleepyheads.

BRUCE: As the Allies, I'm always envious of how many planes the Japanese get in this campaign. The thing is that in *Down in Flames*, quality usually beats quantity. And with Tom flying tired pilots against my rested aces, this gap is magnified, I guess I'm not so jealous after all.

TOM: Over Bougainville, a place apparently named after those flowers my grandmother likes, a Zero and Oscar encounter Bruce's B-25 Mitchell and B-17 Flying Fortress. If Tonys are the equivalent of Frank Stallone, Oscars are the equivalent of what it would be like if Dolph Lundgren had a younger brother trying to make it in show biz. The B-17 is at very high altitude, where my tired pilots can't do anything but waggle their wings suggestively. So they content themselves plinking away at the B-25, trying in vain to build up enough bursts to play an In My Sights 2: Destroyed card that I managed to draw. Bruce's bombers just laugh and fly away, but only after dropping a bunch of bombs.

SCORE: Bruce 26, Tom 18

TURN FOUR

BRUCE: This is the last turn, so there isn't any need to save planes for later. Rabaul is a big fat eight-point target for me, but for the fourth turn in a row, I'm going to pass. Instead, I just need to make sure Tom gains no more than seven net points this turn, and the best way to do that is to fly max protect and deny him the big-point targets while sending the bombers out to force him to spread his fighters thin. If I just successfully defend Guadalcanal and Santa Isabel, I can guarantee there aren't enough points elsewhere on the board for Tom to win. I feel like the guy who has to calculate all those possible NFL playoff scenarios. "If the Allies win at home and Japan loses its next two on the road...."

So I send the A team to Santa Isabel, which is within range of Tom's fighter cover, while keeping the B team over Guadalcanal, where they'll likely face depleted bombers and tired fighters. The big bombers hit Bougainville, while I once again sneak the Dauntlesses over Munda. Everything has to go right for Tom this turn or he loses.

TOM: At this point, my best chance is to hope that Bruce accidentally hits the Execute button before moving any of his airplanes. Otherwise, the fat lady is pretty much halfway through her aria by now.

BRUCE: All Tom gets is three points for defending Rabaul. The Allies sweep the skies over Guadalcanal and Santa Isabel and successfully bomb Bougainville and Munda. Paul Myers, my virtual Robert Conrad, ends up an ace, having shot down one Japanese fighter and four bombers.

TOM: My decimated Bettys were finished off in a suicide mission over Guadalcanal, which is ultimately a very Japanese thing to do. Junichi spends his fourth turn in a row flying patrol over Rabaul, wishing someone would show up so he could at least shoot the guns—even just once—of his super-duper A6M5 Zero. He could have been a contender, but Bruce never even came to Rabaul.

FINAL SCORE: Bruce 38, Tom 21

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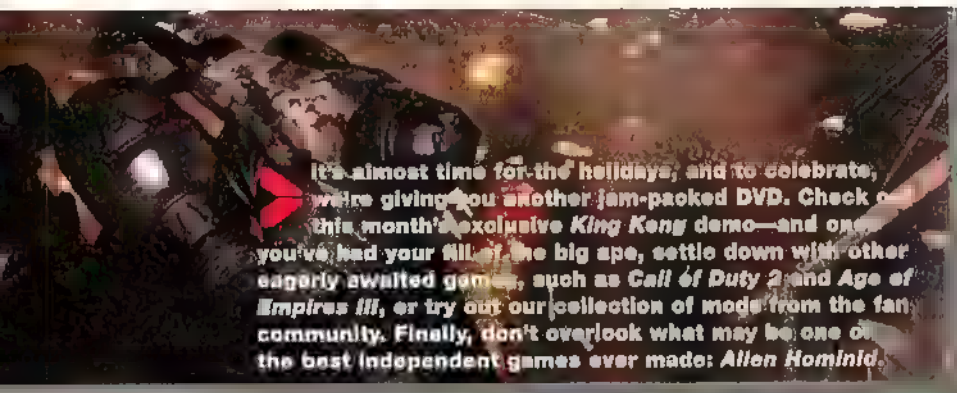
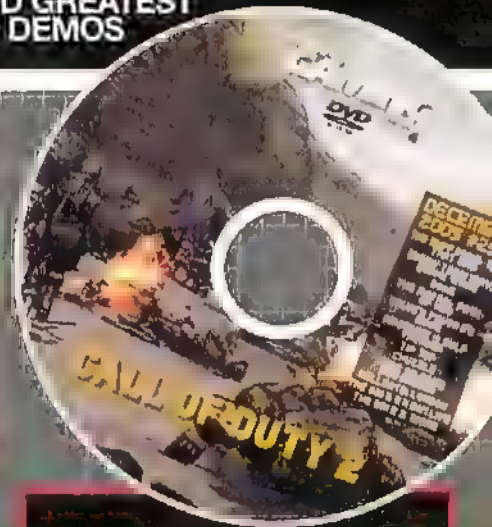
ISSUE 257

ON THE DISC

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PC DEMOS



It's almost time for the holidays, and to celebrate, we're giving you another jam-packed DVD. Check out this month's exclusive *King Kong* demo—and once you've had your fill of the big ape, settle down with other eagerly awaited games, such as *Call of Duty 2* and *Age of Empires III*, or try out our collection of mods from the fan community. Finally, don't overlook what may be one of the best independent games ever made: *Alien Hominid*.



KING KONG

There's no denying it. This ape is king. Play the demo and see the game in action with these three video vignettes.

CALL OF DUTY 2

This demo delivers the cinematic intensity that *Call of Duty* is known for and features enhanced graphics, advanced AI, and explosive action.

AGE OF EMPIRES III

Travel to the New World, meet new people, and then utterly destroy them in this *Age of Empires III* demo.

SERIOUS SAM II

Serious Sam II features even more wacky enemies, over-the-top weapons, colorful environments, and chaotic gameplay than its classic predecessor.

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

The next chapter in the ever-popular *Brothers in Arms* series is here, with even more tactical-combat options drawn from real military procedures.

F.E.A.R.

Last month, we teased you with the trailer, and this month, we deliver an intense single-player demo of Sierra's cinematic FPS.

X-MEN LEGENDS II: RISE OF APOCALYPSE

X-Men fans, rejoice! Here's your chance to flex your mutant powers in this month's demo of the cel-shaded action-RPG.

BONE: OUT FROM BONEVILLE

Jeff Smith's fan-favorite comic book comes alive as the lovable Phone Bone and friends try to find a way back home.

ALIEN HOMINID

Haven't heard of *Alien Hominid*? Check out this indie-gaming success story!

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR TRAILER

Your chance to control the fate of the galaxy will soon be at hand. Take a look at what to expect in this trailer.

THE MOVIES TRAILER

Ever wanted to be in the movies? Well, now you can in Peter Molyneux's latest magnum opus. Get ready to claim your virtual fame!

HALF-LIFE 2: DYSTOPIA MOD

Team Dystopia melds first-person gameplay with a dismal cyberpunk-styled future in the first release of this amazing mod.

ADVANCED TACTICAL CENTER FOR BATTLEFIELD 2

Let your *Battlefield 2* clan work out its strategies and tactics with this integrated chat and drawing package.

THE SIMS 2: DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

Here are some more exclusive CGW T-shirts for your *Sims* alter ego. Represent!

ASTROPOP

PopCap hits it big once again with *AstroPop*—soon to make its debut in the mobile arena. Give it a whirl!

INVADAZOID

Give your trigger finger a workout of galactic proportions with this sci-fi action-arcade game.

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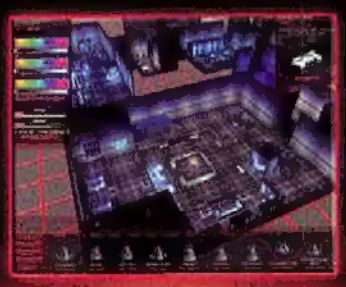

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